

THE
Reincarnated Princess
Spends Another Day
SKIPPING STORY
ROUTES



Story by Bisu
Illustrations by Yukiko

2

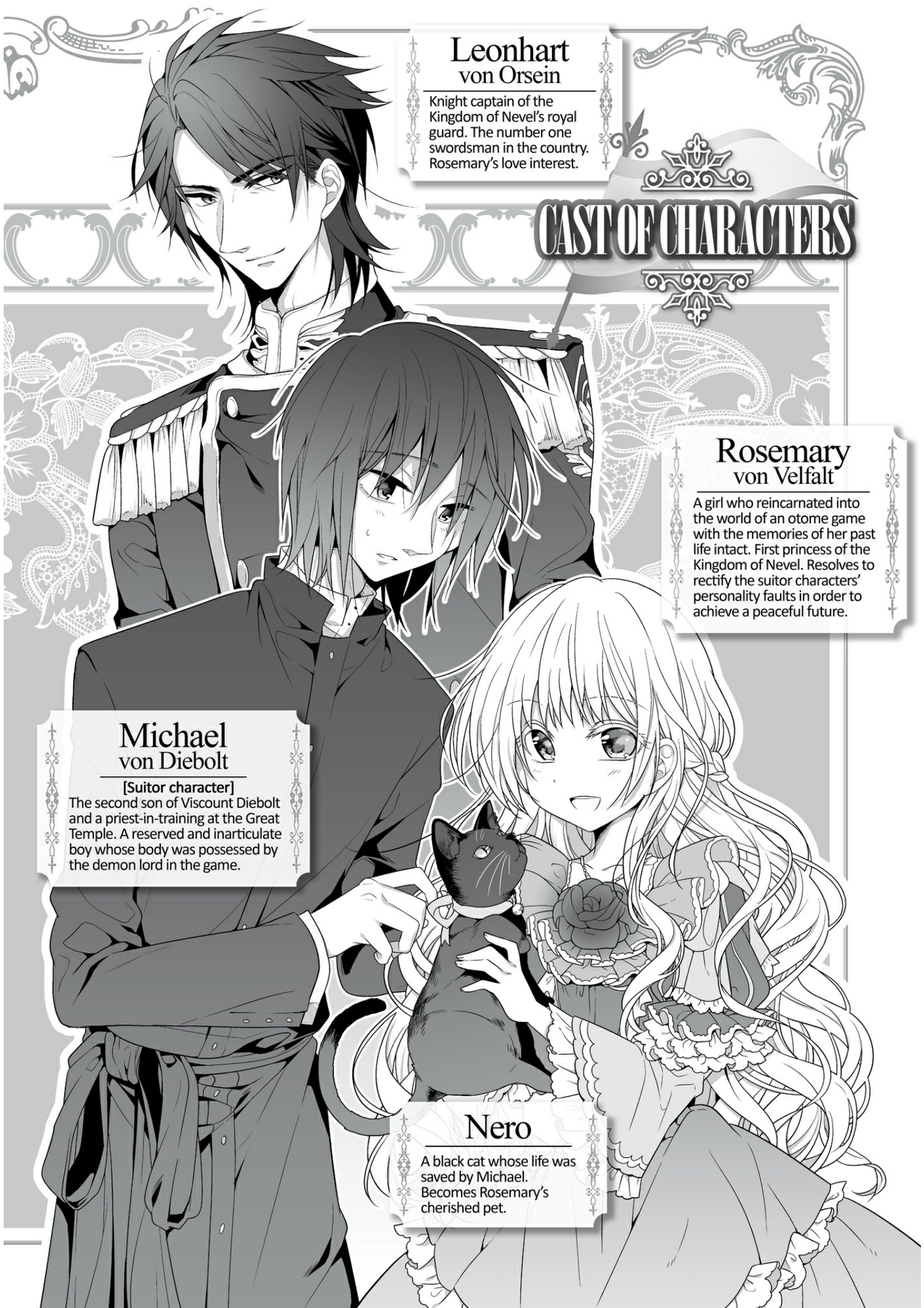


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Leonhart von Orsein

Knight captain of the Kingdom of Nevel's royal guard. The number one swordsman in the country. Rosemary's love interest.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Rosemary von Velfalt

A girl who reincarnated into the world of an otome game with the memories of her past life intact. First princess of the Kingdom of Nevel. Resolves to rectify the suitor characters' personality faults in order to achieve a peaceful future.

Michael von Diebolt

[Suitor character]

The second son of Viscount Diebolt and a priest-in-training at the Great Temple. A reserved and inarticulate boy whose body was possessed by the demon lord in the game.

Nero

A black cat whose life was saved by Michael. Becomes Rosemary's cherished pet.

**Randolf
von Velfalt**

King of Nevel and
Rosemary's father.

**Irene
von Altman**

Head sorceress.
Teacher to Lutz
and Teo.

**Teo
Eilenberg**

A sorcerer with command
over fire-type magic.
A cheerful and caring boy.

**George
zu Eigel**

[Suitor Character]
The only son of
Count Eigel. Previously
Rosemary's potential
fiancé.

**Lutz
Eilenberg**

A sorcerer with command
over ice-type magic.
Possesses remarkable
talent that's said to appear
only once every century.
Cool and misanthropic.

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Prologue

Long ago, this world was on the brink of destruction.

It happened one thousand years ago, in an era of endless conflict, when the lords of every land wielded their power and authority to fight against one another. War erupted between one large country and an alliance of three smaller countries. Towns were reduced to ruins, forests were burned, and devastation spread throughout the land.

Even as people and animals alike lost their homes and the fighting raged beyond its tenth year, the war showed no signs of calming down. Rather, the ferocity continued to increase. Just as despair had nearly devoured the entirety of the continent, there came a turning point. However, the deliverer was no god or savior, and what they delivered was not mercy or salvation.

The great war ended—not in peace—but because of a fresh calamity.

A powerful entity reduced tens of thousands of soldiers to ash in an instant and planted fresh seeds of despair across the continent. This being would be given a name by later generations: the demon lord.

He led an army of arcane monsters—beasts that possessed sword-deflecting shells and sharp fangs that could pierce through shields. The demon lord himself wielded an enormous amount of magical power, and he advanced through the lines of armies, breaking through what pitiful resistance mere humans could muster.

After a single day and night, a country fell to his strength. With a foothold secured, the onslaught picked up even more speed. The demon lord's grip gradually spread further across the continent.

At long last, the feuding countries realized that they should put aside their petty squabbles, and they resolved to join arms against their fearsome adversary. This was the opening scene of the war between humanity and the demon lord, a fight for the survival of the human race.

No, “fight” is much too presumptuous a word to use. This conflict would be better labeled as the beginning of a descent to hell, where the humans lost ground one-sidedly. The demon lord’s fist came down atop all in equal measure: on the pompous royals and nobles reclining on their luxurious chairs, on the weary soldiers exhausted from long years of war, and on the peasants devastated by the burning of their fields.

The demon lord eroded away at the continent, laying waste to everything in his path.

What stopped the total annihilation of the human race was good fortune and stout perseverance. Even as humanity crawled through the dirt, hounded by monsters, they groped for some means to resist the demon lord. Ultimately, they succeeded in sealing him away. This was nothing short of victory for every human, though the eventual triumph had taken over half a century of continuous struggle.

The demon lord returned several times over the next few centuries, but humanity always fought back and prevailed, despite the hardship. Each time, the seal holding back the demon lord had its accuracy improved. In the last five hundred years, the seal hadn’t been broken even once.

At long last, peace returned to the continent. In the extended era of tranquility that followed the demon lord’s onslaught, many countries rose and fell, and little by little, tales of the demon lord dwindled away. Even in Nevel, which had been an established nation for over a millennium, stories of the demon lord were relegated to remnants and confined to fairy tales.

But the demon lord hadn’t disappeared. He rested still, basking beneath one of the many temples in the Kingdom of Nevel, waiting in quiet slumber.

Waiting for a hand to rouse him.

The Reincarnated Princess Asks for Advice

I'd embraced Sir Leonhart, giving in to a flood of my emotions and holding on to him as a few minutes passed.

When I came to my senses and processed what was currently happening, I grew so nervous that my whole body froze. Although I'd acted on impulse, I was worried about how forward I had been. My feelings were a mess; half of me wanted to scream at my past self, and the other, bolder half felt that applause was in order.

I shut my eyes to escape the enormous embarrassment, but putting the blinders on visual stimuli only seemed to heighten my other senses. I could feel Sir Leonhart's strong muscles through the rugged fabric of his knight's uniform. At our physical points of contact, the feel and heat of his hard arms and chest were conveyed directly to me.

My heart started beating so fast that it hurt, and I felt like I was suffocating. I instinctively took a deep breath, but even the air smelled of Sir Leonhart, and a wave of dizziness overwhelmed my head.

"Your Highness...?"

"Ah?!"

My body jumped after I heard his whisper-quiet voice slide into my ears. *I think you're probably lowering the volume of your voice so as not to startle me, but that plan is backfiring! You've done the opposite!!!* A murmur from his mellow baritone was nothing short of a weapon, one of mass seduction, and lethal for girls.

To be honest, at this point I was thoroughly overwhelmed. I wasn't experienced enough to sit back and just enjoy the delight of being embraced by the person I loved.

I wasn't even sure whether pulling him into a hug without waiting for his assent was acceptable in the first place. In some situations, that could be called

groping, and it would be considered a crime. Given my lofty social status, it could even be labeled sexual harassment; however uncomfortable Sir Leonhart might've been, he couldn't just push a princess away.

I knew that I should end the hug and step back, but I'd missed my chance. Cogs whirled round and round in my brain, but only panic ensued, and no good plan for extricating myself came to mind. During all of that, my body temperature shot up and the palms of my hands began to sweat.

Oh God, what if I start to stink of sweat?!

"What's the matter?" asked Sir Leonhart softly. "Are you perhaps feeling under the weather?"

He rubbed my back gently to soothe me, and at that moment, my distress and anxious nerves swelled past their limit. I leaped backward, and a strange sound came out of my mouth.

"Y-Yas!"

Sir Leonhart watched my eccentric behavior with wide-eyed astonishment.

I have to say, my movement just now was very frog-like. Okay, just kill me now.

Sir Leonhart stared at me with a dumbfounded expression, and I felt so pathetic that I could've burst into tears. I could feel the heat steadily creeping onto my face.

Seeing how red I'd become, Sir Leonhart put on a smile. The expression twinkling in his eyes was the one he wore when looking at something delightful, and I couldn't sense any malice from him. Of course, that did nothing for my embarrassment. I wanted to dig a deep hole and bury myself.

He soon noticed the tears pricking at the corners of my eyes and his smile vanished. "Pardon me," he said awkwardly, clearing his throat.

"I'm sorry too," I replied, feigning poise. "I apologize for the trouble I've caused. I not only lost my composure, but I also embraced you without your permission. I beg your forgiveness, Sir Orsein."

I moved to bow my head, but Sir Leonhart stopped me.

“Please don’t say that,” he said. “You’ve caused me no trouble. In fact, it would please me if you would rely on me even more.” His voice was calm and soothing.

“You didn’t find it unpleasant?” Given a fresh bout of courage from his positive feedback, I took the plunge and asked the question that had been on my mind.

“Of course not,” he confirmed with an unhesitant nod, dispelling my concern.

The tension that had turned my body rigid quickly drained away. I let out a sigh and felt relieved that I’d managed to avoid ruining his image of me.

“But...Your Highness?”

“Yes?”

My relief was short-lived. He directed a suggestive glance at me, and my trepidation returned. The expression on my face hardened as I wondered whether he’d found the hug unpleasant after all.

But in stark contrast to me, Sir Leonhart smiled cheerily, with eyes like those of a child up to no good. “Have you stopped calling me Leon?”

“Huh...?”

I heard his words and blinked my eyes several times to process. Simultaneously, I replayed our earlier exchange in my mind. I recalled the events up until this moment, starting from when Chris acted out of consideration and left me alone with Sir Leonhart.

Suddenly, I froze. The color drained from my face.

I have a feeling that when I lost control of my emotions and hugged him, “Sir Leon” might have slipped out of my mouth instead of “Sir Orsein.” Ohh, I’ve gone and done it now!!!

“A-About that... Uh, it was...” I stammered, looking away from him. I broke out in a cold sweat as I desperately fumbled for an excuse.

I could say that I got it wrong? Yeah, but “why?” is gonna be his next question. Maybe I could say that I was being honest about my inner urges? Oh, right, that could work. If I wanna creep him out, that is.

Or maybe, “I always call you by your first name in my mind, so it just slipped out?” Nope, if I go with that excuse, I might as well just say, “I’m in love with you” too.

The only plans that came to mind were all useless, and my efforts to wriggle my way out of this came up short. I couldn’t find any excuse to gloss over what had happened. Realizing that, I took a deep breath and raised my head back up.

“Would it be all right to call you that?” I asked timidly. There was no way to put the cat back in the bag, so I decided to give voice to my long-held wish.

I mean, it’s not fair that only Chris gets to call him by his first name. I wanna do that too.

I placed a hand on my chest to quell the nervous, rapid beating of my heart and waited for his answer.

Sir Leonhart met my gaze and nodded, smiling.

“Please do.”

“Th-Th-Thank you.”

Way to go, Rose! The nickname “Sir Leon” is mine for the taking!!!

In my mind, I was roaring to the heavens and pumping my fist, but on the outside, I just smiled to keep up at least the appearance of modesty. I couldn’t entirely disguise my inner feelings though; my fists ended up clenched, but I wanted to believe that he probably didn’t notice.

“It’s not something that you need to thank me for.” Sir Leonhart narrowed his eyes kindly and gazed at me.

“Well then.” I cleared my throat. “Sir Leon,” I called his name again. There was a slight anxious tremor in my voice.

A part of me wanted our meandering conversation to last forever, but our time was limited. I had to make the most of the short window I’d been given while Chris was occupying Klaus.

“Will you hear what I have to say?” I asked.

Sir Leonhart’s eyes opened wider in surprise. His smile faded, and he nodded.

“I will.”

The low tone of his voice and the severity of his facial expression imprinted the gravity of the situation on my feelings. I readied myself and began to speak.

“When I was younger,” I started, “I had a dream.”

“A dream?”

The abrupt change of subject took Sir Leonhart by surprise. I nodded in confirmation and continued talking. “The dream wasn’t a shocking one. In fact, it was exceedingly normal. The scenery was familiar, and I knew the people very well. It was an ordinary dream, like a continuation of the waking world. But something didn’t feel right.”

“Didn’t feel right...?” he asked. “In what way?”

“The people in my dream had a resemblance to the people around me in the waking world. That is, I knew how their faces looked, how they acted, and what they wore, so I think they were the same people. However, they seemed a little bit older to me.”

Hearing that, Sir Leonhart gasped. “A premonition,” he whispered, and his voice croaked.

“That’s overstating it,” I replied. “I don’t believe that I have a divine gift or anything. Even so, after the small amount of time I spent in that dream, I felt that it was somehow different to my usual dreams... I couldn’t just write off that feeling or convince myself that I was overthinking.”

I’d decided to explain what I knew, swapping “memories from my past life” with “a special dream.” I did feel guilty about lying, but telling the whole truth would’ve been far too risky.

The fact that I’d reincarnated with the memories of my past life intact was already too crazy to admit. But the possibility that we could be living inside of a video game world was something that needed even more care.

I mean, televisions didn’t even exist in this world, so it didn’t seem likely that I could get someone to understand what a video game was. And even if I could, I didn’t think it would be right to explain in the first place. However much mental

fortitude Sir Leonhart had, he'd still undergo shock if he learned that the world in which he lived was an artificial creation.

Besides, I wasn't absolutely positive that this world and the one from the game *Welcome to the Hidden World* were the same.

There's a chance that it's just a very similar otherworld... I hope.

Either way, this place was my current reality. The people I cared about here weren't just streams of ones and zeros.

When they're gone, they're gone. There's nowhere in the whole world where I can find a replacement for them. And don't even talk about saving and loading, because that's not happening!

I'll take every measure that I can to keep these people safe.

Besides, opening up about the entire truth isn't the priority; rather, I need to focus on telling Sir Leonhart all the information I know and preventing the incidents that will occur in the future.

And winning over Sir Leonhart as my cooperator is a priority as well.

After I finished this simple explanation, Sir Leonhart fell silent with a difficult look on his face. I had no means of guessing whether I'd managed to convince him. Moreover, I wasn't confident about whether I'd conveyed everything properly with my inferior vocabulary.

"Your Highness." Sir Leonhart spoke after a short period of silence.

"Yes!" My body jumped upon being exposed to his gaze. My overstrung nerves must've prompted an overreaction.

"To summarize what you've told me, you have knowledge of events which have the potential to occur in the future. This power is not all-encompassing, and it only relates to specific individuals around you at specific times. In addition, there are many parts that are vague and facts that are unknown to you, meaning that you can't determine the exact dates for a large number of the events taking place. Finally, the future that you've seen can sometimes be overwritten as a result of your actions in the present. Am I not mistaken in my interpretation?"

“That’s right,” I answered, my voice terribly feeble.

Hearing it said aloud, I can’t imagine a more unrealistic story.

Even I thought that it sounded ridiculous, and I was the one who’d said it. If a friend had told me something like that out of the blue when I was still living in Japan, I doubt that I would’ve been able to believe them right away without difficulty.

But there was no confusion or frustration in Sir Leonhart’s face or voice, which threw me off-balance even more.

He crossed his arms, held a hand to his chin, tilted his head down in thought, and then quietly muttered, “I see. So you were operating by yourself in order to prevent tragedies from befalling those around you. And the reason why you didn’t come to Klaus or to me for help was because you had difficulty deciding how detailed you could afford to be with your explanation. That, and the discrepancies between the future you know...”

“H-Hold on a second!” I interrupted the matter-of-fact flow of speech coming from Sir Leonhart.

His eyes had been shrewdly narrowed, but he opened them wide and glanced at me. “What is it?”

“You believe me?”

I was aware of just how absurd my story was. On top of that, I was a ten-year-old child. I couldn’t have complained if he’d brushed this story off as a little girl’s overactive imagination.

“I believe you,” Sir Leonhart declared without the slightest hesitation, despite all of that.

“Why?” I found myself asking, my voice hoarse. Rather than feeling joy that he’d believed me, my confusion reigned supreme.

Seeing my dazed state, Sir Leonhart lowered his eyebrows for a moment in a troubled look, but then he immediately returned to a serious expression and continued to talk.

“Let’s see... There are several reasons, but foremost among them is the

incident from half a year ago. The planned abduction of the two sorcerers Lutz and Teo Eilenberg was a top secret matter, and only a handful of knights in the royal guard were privy to that information. It's not impossible that the intel could have leaked from one of those knights, but that alone wouldn't suffice as an explanation. After all, you took action before we did."

"Huh?"

"You had Klaus investigate Hilde Kremer, didn't you? We suspected Nicholas as a spy by that point, but we hadn't yet uncovered the connection to Hilde."

Oh, right. I'd started off investigating Hilde's fishy behavior, and that had led me to Nicholas. But Sir Leonhart and the others had gone in the reverse direction—from suspecting Nicholas to scrutinizing Hilde. I could've used leaked information to follow the same route as the royal guard's investigation, but it would've been impossible to use that knowledge and start off with Hilde.

"Moreover, you don't strike me as the sort of person who would lie for no good reason."

I gasped. Sir Leonhart's words had pierced deep into my heart. I *had* lied, but not for no good reason. However noble my justification was though, it wouldn't change the fact that I was deceiving him.

Pangs of guilt throbbed in my heart. I wanted to give in and apologize there and then, but I bit my lips and held it in. I'd made my choice to press on. There would be no take-backs.

So instead, I smiled and expressed my appreciation. "Thank you very much." That's just what I had to do.

Sir Leonhart was quiet for a few seconds and then smiled wryly. There was a warm look in his eyes behind his troubled expression. Perhaps he'd realized that I hadn't opened up about everything. That it hadn't *all* been truthful. Even so, he didn't try to press me any further, though I sported an awkward smile.

"Your Highness."

"Yes?"

"If you'll permit me to ask, I'd like you to tell me—are there any events in the

near future which we ought to avoid?”

At the mention of future events, naturally, the demon lord’s revival popped into my head first and foremost. It would be absolutely vital to break that flag if I wanted any chance of living a peaceful life. But it was still too early in the timeline to act on it.

“The trouble is still some way off in the future, but there are steps that we ought to get out of the way now, while we can.”

“In that case,” continued Sir Leonhart, “is there anything that I can assist you with?”

This question was exactly what I’d been hoping to hear.

I steeled my face with a serious expression and nodded deeply. “Yes! Please!” I said emphatically. “But not now. I fear that the explanation would take too long to tell you.”

“I agree,” Sir Leonhart said. “Klaus will return any moment now. ‘Stay’ is not a trick he knows, particularly when you’re involved.” He chuckled.

“I’d like to set aside some proper time for a meeting in the near future,” I told him. “When I do, could I ask that you hear what I have to say?”

“Of course.”

A relieved sigh escaped me, and I relaxed my fists. I’d subconsciously been squeezing them, probably because I’d been bracing myself up to this point.

In the very next moment, there was a knock at the door. The timing was conspicuously impeccable.

The one knocking was the talented yet annoying man whose repertoire of tricks didn’t include “stay.” Klaus—my personal guard—had returned not five seconds after I’d arranged my next meeting with Sir Leonhart.

When I flinched back at his all-too-perfect timing, Sir Leonhart gave a wry smile and whispered quietly, “Don’t worry, he didn’t overhear.”

Sir Leonhart then walked past me toward the door and opened it.

I cast a look beyond the threshold and spotted Klaus there, heaving his

shoulders, forehead drenched in sweat.

From the looks of things, Sir Leon's right, I thought. My worries of Klaus overhearing seem to have been for nothing.

I let out a second, longer sigh.

The Reincarnated Princess Deliberates

“Are you sure that’s the move you want to make, Princess?”

The sound of a voice calling out to me snapped my concentration back to reality.

“Hmm? Oh.”

I eyed the chessboard placed atop the table, and then the piece in my hand. A silly-sounding murmur left my lips. I’d been too preoccupied with my own thoughts to notice that I was about to absentmindedly march my queen off to her grave.

I slowly withdrew the hand that’d been a moment away from placing the queen onto the board. Quiet laughter reached my ears. Embarrassed, I peeked across the table at the handsome and smiling boy seated opposite me.

“Sorry,” I said.

“It’s fine. You haven’t put it down yet, so you’re in the clear.”

Teo—a boy with fiery-red hair—narrowed his garnet-like eyes as he spoke.

The apology wasn’t just for pulling my piece back, but also for not focusing on the game. Teo was aware of that though, and was telling me indirectly not to worry about either issue.

“That was one of the few chances I’ve ever had to beat you,” Teo said good-naturedly, “but I’d rather win on my own merits if I can.” He clasped his hands behind his head and winked playfully, then let out a cheery laugh. The elegantly crafted cast-metal chair creaked loudly as Teo leaned his weight into the backrest.

Roughly a year had passed since the foiling of the sorcerer abduction plot. Now fourteen, Teo looked burlier than he had before; he was presently in the prime of his growth period.

“I won’t let you win just yet,” I declared. I placed my queen down and shot

back a smile in response to his joke.

“Ah!” After my move, the confidence drained from Teo’s face. He crossed his arms and sunk into thought. After much deliberation, he moved a piece, only for me to attack it again.

“Check,” I announced, and Teo pored his attention over the board.

He resigned from the game after a brief pause and then groaned in frustration. “Aaah, I look like an idiot now,” Teo whined. I wrung out a smile.

“You’ve only just learned how to play chess,” I remarked. “*I’d* be the idiot if I lost to you.”

Less than a month had passed since Teo had decided to pick up chess. Since then, we would occasionally play against each other in the break room adjoining the greenhouse.

He’d been learning about battle tactics in his classroom lessons, but apparently he couldn’t get the contents of the textbooks to stick in his mind, so he hit upon the idea of trying games.

Honestly, I wasn’t too sure whether familiarity with board games would be of any use in a real battle. I framed that doubt as a question and posed it to Teo while he was tidying up and putting the chess pieces away.

“Dunno,” he said, tilting his head. “After all, I’m new to all these tactics, to chess and everything, so I don’t have a clue!” Teo declared this clearly, making a thumbs-up gesture.

Yep, makes sense... Can’t argue with that.

Teo saw the warm look I was giving him. He laughed loudly and added, “But the game is quite profound, and I do think I can learn something from it. To tell you the truth, I never saw the point of drumming tactical knowledge into a foot soldier. But it really is possible for a single man to change the course of a battle, isn’t it? It’s similar to this little guy.” Teo rolled a pawn across the palm of his hand as he spoke. “If this piece reaches the back rank, he can become anyone except the king.”

“Indeed.” I nodded. Pawns could even become knights and bishops. They

usually just became queens though. The potential to vastly alter the course of battle could come down to a single person's actions.

"That's right," I continued. "In fact, if you and Lutz had been captured by Skelluts, we'd be in a completely different situation right now." In my mind, I appended: *just like in Hidden World*.

Teo's eyes grew wide. Then he gave a single nod and joined my musings on the topic with great interest.

"Suppose we failed to discover the abduction plot beforehand. How do you think things would've turned out?"

Visions of *Hidden World* appeared in my mind. War had bred more war, culminating in a long-lasting era of widespread tumult across the continent. I pondered over Teo's question for a while before answering.

"First off, the war would've stretched on."

The threat of war was never far away when the loose cannon known as Skelluts was on the scene. But the neighboring countries would've lost faith in Nevel if we'd proactively declared war without a legitimate justification. *Hidden World's* Nevel must've suspected Skelluts after Lutz's abduction, but without proof, there was nothing they could've done. After Nevel had perennially found itself on the defensive, war had broken out between the Kingdom of Vint and the Kingdom of Skelluts.

"We couldn't have picked a fight with another country on circumstantial evidence alone...and Skelluts would've launched a war against one of its neighbors while we floundered."

"I see," Teo murmured after listening to my explanation in silence. "Well, they would've wanted to take us, their new weapons, out for a test fight."

Teo grasped the pawn that he'd been fiddling with and placed it on the board. A lone white foot soldier in the middle of the black side's formation. That was exactly the position where Lutz had found himself in *Hidden World*.

I stared at a black pawn that I'd picked up and recalled the worrying train of thought that I'd been considering a few minutes ago—there were now distinct differences between the world of the otome game *Welcome to the Hidden*

World and our present situation.

I also considered the dangerous figure we'd have to deal with sometime soon—the demon lord.

Without speaking, I glanced down at the board and placed the black pawn amongst the white formation. This soldier hiding among our country's army wasn't a foreign spy. He was a new, different menace.

I knew from *Hidden World* that his name was Michael von Diebolt, and he was born the second son of a viscount in the Kingdom of Nevel. In the game, where the shrine maiden had been summoned, Michael was a suitor character. A priest, in fact. Unfortunately, he also became the leader of our enemies, the demon lord.

However, Michael was not, at present, the demon lord. Right now, he was just a pious priest, one who'd cast away the luxurious lifestyle of his birth into a noble family, choosing instead to live a life in the service of a god.

"In the hypothetical event that war had broken out between Skelluts and Vint, Nevel wouldn't have been able to stand around and do nothing to help our ally. The trouble would've spread inside our borders."

According to *Hidden World*, when Michael was thirteen, the first signs of unrest appeared inside of Nevel. In the war between Skelluts and Vint, Nevel of course backed our ally Vint, but the fighting left swathes of unrest in its wake. Years went by, but the conflict still raged on. Eventually, five of the countries on the western half of the continent were pulled into this horrible mess.

"The longer the war dragged on, the more dire the situation would've grown," I continued. "We'd have to face the prospect of other countries taking advantage of our weakened state to launch an attack."

In *Hidden World*, the Kingdom of Lapter, a country neighboring us to the northeast, invaded Nevel, taking advantage of our reduced military power brought on by the long-lasting war. And thus, yet another war began.

"Yikes... Sounds like a disaster," Teo muttered, knitting his brows deeply in a clear display of his displeasure.

"A disaster, indeed," I nodded gravely. "If we'd been attacked from the east,

the fighting would've spread to our agricultural land. That would've put pressure on our food supply and invited the risk of famine."

To compound an already dreadful situation, a plague began to spread throughout *Hidden World's* Nevel from the south.

The awful spectacles taking place inside of Nevel grieved the priest Michael's heart. The sights preyed upon his mind, and he resolved to leave his home, the Great Temple, and travel throughout the country in the hope that he could somehow offer aid. Michael wandered around the stricken land, nursing the wounded and the sick, saving children, and offering prayers for the dead.

He wound up in a border village, near the front lines. There, he found a half-ruined temple on the outskirts of the village. While rummaging through the building to find a spot where he could pass the night away from the elements, he happened upon a hidden door.

Through the door was a small room with a mysterious altar. Enshrined there was a stone the size of his fist.

Although he found the sight disturbing, he decided to rest in a corner of this room, telling himself that it'd only be for one night. That same night, however, the fighting reached the old temple, and it collapsed.

Michael lost his life, crushed beneath the rubble.

At the same time, the stone on the altar—the stone sealing away the demon lord—ruptured. Cast free from the seal that had bound him, the demon lord possessed Michael's lifeless body, which had been lying nearby, and thus returned to the world.

In other words, by the beginning of *Hidden World*, Michael was already dead. Only the demon lord who'd possessed Michael's corpse remained.

"I get it..." Teo said seriously, heaving a long sigh. "So basically, one wrong move and we'd have been screwed beyond belief."

As he'd said, this was purely a hypothetical scenario, assuming that the abduction plot had proved successful. Though these were true events of *Hidden World*, in this version of Nevel we'd successfully avoided that outcome. Unfortunately, I couldn't guarantee that we were one hundred percent off the

hook.

A coup d'état had taken place in Skelluts, and we'd managed to prevent the war between Skelluts and Vint from starting. That was all well and good, but the menace of the Kingdom of Lapter still lingered in the northeast. There could also still be an outbreak of plague, even without a war. I couldn't be certain that Michael would stay put in his home temple either.

There were just too many uncertain factors.

What was more, I couldn't at all predict what was coming, given the huge differences between the backstory of *Hidden World* and the present-day Kingdom of Nevel. My knowledge of the game, which was a kind of foresight, was no longer of much use.

If I wanted information, I'd have to do my own research. The mountain of tasks ahead of me seemed dizzying, and a melancholic sigh escaped my mouth.

"I think I'll take my studies a little more seriously," Teo said, starting to clear the chess pieces away again. His face was meek.

I looked at him, my eyes wide, and stopped tidying. After blinking a few times, I tilted my head. "I think you're already taking them seriously enough."

Teo might've looked quite sloppy at first sight, but I knew very well how earnest and thoughtful he truly was. He'd listen with joy when I explained about medicinal herbs, and I'd heard that he'd copy everything down as notes so that he wouldn't forget.

But Teo lightly shook his head. A smirk was etched across his handsome features.

"I'm biased. I only get enthusiastic about some topics. I'll put my whole heart into learning about medicine, but I never want to study tactics. Preparing for battle isn't really all that appealing to me, y'know?" He then mumbled self-deprecatingly, "That might be rich coming from a sorcerer who can only use offensive magic though."

I more or less understood what he was getting at. Tactics are methods for winning wars. He felt resistance to the idea because it was almost as though he were being told to learn more effective techniques for killing the enemy. For

killing people. This task would affect Teo all the more because of his diligent studies of medicine.

“But I realized,” Teo said, “sometimes tactics are necessary to prevent conflict before it starts.”

He grabbed the black pawn that I’d left on the board, then stood up and leaned over the table to present the pawn to me, where I was sitting on the other side.

I saw myself reflected in his narrowed eyes. They possessed the mysterious property of appearing both red and black, depending on how the light struck them.

“If that knowledge can be used to save lives and not just end them, then I wanna learn more.”

“Teo...”

I found myself entranced by the mature look of his smile. I returned to my senses a second later, and hurriedly reached out with my hand to take the pawn.

However, the moment before I could, someone else’s hand suddenly landed a chop in between mine and Teo’s.

“Whoa?!”

“Hwaaa?”

The chop had been destined to hit Teo’s hand, but Teo had dodged the attack with his superb reflexes. The black pawn went flying, bounced off of the table, and landed on the floor.

I froze in place. Teo covered his right hand with his left, shielding the one he’d swiftly pulled back from the chop. We both followed the path of the pawn with our eyes as it rolled across the floor. When the pawn collided with a pair of boots, we slowly lifted our eyes up to the figure standing there.

It was Lutz, the ice sorcerer, who was enveloping the two of us with a chilly glare.

I thought he was out helping Miss Irene on an errand. Just when did he get

back? And why does he look so mad...?

Lutz's brows were deeply knitted. His mouth was curled up in a frown like an upside-down letter V, and he was emitting an atmosphere of rage so potent that the very air around him seemed about to freeze. His whole body gave testament to his anger.

What in the world have we done wrong? Was it the conversation about tactics? Or the ominous talk we'd had about the potential future? Or has something else entirely rubbed him the wrong way?

All I could do was watch on, trembling in fear. Lutz slowly placed a hand on his hip, as if to mock my inability to move. He stood there in that imposing stance, working the muscles in his jaw, and while looking down at us, abruptly opened his mouth.

"You're too close!!!" Lutz roared.

"Huh?"

"Err?"

A few seconds were needed before Lutz's grandiose proclamation could worm its way into my brain. Or rather, I needed more than just three words to understand his objection properly.

"Too close? Do you mean how far apart we are?" Teo asked. He sounded confused and scratched at his cheek with a finger. "The princess and I *are* sitting on opposite ends of the table."

"The way I see it," Lutz declared, "you made a move on the princess just now."

"I did not! I was just handing her a chess piece!!!" Teo waved his hands in front of his body and frantically defended himself. His face was blushing enough to be apparent, even on his brown skin.

Lutz didn't back down, however. He rejected Teo's explanation with a snort.

"Suuure... All alone with the princess in this tiny room? I think you lost control of yourself."

"That's a flat-out lie!" Teo spat out in desperation, pointing a finger at Klaus,

who was standing by the entrance of the break room. “Besides, we weren’t alone either! This knight’s been giving me the evil eye the whole time with that horrifying look on his face!!!”

I’d neglected to acknowledge his existence, but the truth was that Klaus had been there from the beginning. I couldn’t see his face because he was stationed behind me, but I expected that he’d probably been scowling at Teo.

“Uhh, sorry about that, Teo...” I apologized, feeling embarrassed beyond belief.

“It’s fine.” Teo shook his head. His face showed his exhaustion. “Really, it’s fine. It’s just... I’ve felt him staring for so long. Like it’s...piercing me.”

“Be glad that nothing physical has pierced you,” Klaus muttered contemptuously.

Teo’s face contorted in a grimace. “Could you please not grumble something so terrifying?”

“If his sword isn’t to your liking, then how about I freeze you with magic?”

“That’s not what I was saying!” Teo exclaimed. “I wasn’t griping about the specific method of my murder!!!”

“The sword it is then,” Klaus chimed in.

“Like hell it is! Why is my death rapidly turning into an established fact?!”

This has all gotten a little...chaotic.

I played the spectator, letting out an empty-hearted chuckle. But I wasn’t brave enough to plunge myself into the middle of this exchange of violent threats and fervent comebacks.

Sorry, Teo. Really.

The Reincarnated Princess's Encounter

Before I can do anything, I'll need some intel. Let's rummage through whatever books are nearby for the time being.

After I parted from Lutz and Teo, I made my way toward one of the libraries. As always, I was accompanied by my pesky personal guard; apparently, his duty of following after me was never in doubt.

We soon reached the library.

"Hmm..." I murmured quietly after opening the massive door and glancing across the rows of bookshelves that lined the inside of the room. *Where should I start?*

Broadly speaking, I had three objectives: one, preventing a war; two, stopping the spread of disease; and three, obstructing the demon lord's revival. Those problems might've appeared to be unrelated, but in truth, they were all connected.

I suppose I'll investigate some maps first, so that I can reference them while I'm making progress.

I stepped forward, and a second pair of footsteps echoed in chorus, mimicking my own. Klaus was following along like it was the most natural thing in the world.

I swallowed back the sigh which had almost escaped my lips and spun around.

"Klaus," I called out, gazing up at the handsome face which was a full two head lengths above me. I mustered as much composure as I could. "I want you to wait here, by the entrance."

"Why is that?" Klaus responded instantly with a question. He then continued in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, "I'm your guard. I cannot fulfill my duties unless you permit me to remain right by your side."

After hearing him declare that with a serious look on his face, my expression

soured.

Uh-uh, nope.

Your response was so automatic, like nothing could be more obvious, but I've never once seen any guard as clingy as you. Try to keep in mind that even your charge has the right to a little privacy. Your lack of respect for personal space is so abnormal that I can't help but feel a little sorry for myself, and I'm amazed that I haven't had a nervous breakdown yet.

"I'm only telling you to wait by the entrance. I'll give you a shout the moment I need you."

"I cannot agree to that."

God, this asshole.

I don't think that anyone could blame me for unconsciously clenching my fists. He'd said no without a moment's hesitation! That enraged me; at the same time though, alarm bells sounded in my head.

I would soon turn eleven years old. In other words, I'd be reaching what society called a "difficult age." Having a male guard glued to my side at all hours would make certain things awkward.

Moreover, I might be fine, as my mental age is technically over twenty, but I'm not sure how the shrine maiden will be able to cope with Klaus's unwarranted intimacy.

Klaus would eventually be assigned to guard the shrine maiden rather than me. I wouldn't have minded handing him over if he'd been the same Klaus from *Hidden World*—a proper gentleman, just as long as nobody pushed his masochism button. But relinquishing him as he currently was now didn't sit right with me at all.

For my own sake in the days to come, and for the shrine maiden's sake in the future, I need to teach this man "stay!"

"Klaus," I called out to him, putting on a serious expression. I'd made my decision.

He replied at once, alert.

Turning to him, I lowered my tone and ordered, “Kneel.”

I heard him gulp. He stared at me, eyes wide open, at a loss for words. However, before long, he returned to his senses.

“Understood.” He bent his knee in an efficient movement.

The sight of a handsome young man in a knight’s uniform kneeling in such a respectful way was rather picturesque. Although, I should stress that I wasn’t enacting one of my personal fantasies. I wanted him kneeling because gawking up at him from below would’ve lacked the intimidation factor necessary.

Klaus *was* acting slightly strange though. His masculine cheeks were flushed, and there were tears in his eyes.

Maybe he’s actually nervous for once? I am planning to train you, but physical discipline isn’t what I had in mind, so no need to be so scared.

I decided against rephrasing myself, although I’d wanted to, and instead vented all of my irritation in a single sigh. “I once told you that your master is the king,” I started, intent on getting to the point. “But that doesn’t mean you can ignore the orders I give you.”

“That has...never been—”

Klaus flung his head back up and attempted to deny what I’d said, his voice teeming with impatience. But I immediately cut him off.

“Shut your mouth and listen.” I glared down at him coldly from above, and Klaus trembled slightly.

“Yes!”

You might find it humiliating, not being allowed to plead your case, but just let me get out everything I want to say.

“If I ever tell you to do something that’s wrong, then I don’t mind if you ignore the social hierarchy and refuse. But conversely, this means that I expect you to obey every order that I give, except the ones which you can’t possibly justify.”

I purposefully picked a coercive wording. I couldn’t afford to say, “*It’s not like I want to be ordering you around.*” Thinking of what was to come, leaving things

the way they were would be begging for disaster.

I had objectives to clear. More often in the coming days, I'd be asking Sir Leonhart, my cooperator, to accompany me instead of Klaus.

With that in mind, I decided that I'd be best off eliminating this inconvenience here and now.

"You're a male guard, and I'm a princess, so from now on, it might not be possible for you to stay by my side at all times. In fact, there are plenty of situations where that level of closeness would be infeasible. What will you do then? Will you give up if I'm too far away for your sword to reach?"

"No, I won't," Klaus denied without pause. "Under no circumstances could I ever give up on protecting you. I swear on my honor as a knight, on my life." Klaus placed his hand on his heart and stared straight at me. He'd declared this loud and clear, his face serious.

He looked as awe-inspiring as the fairy-tale knights that little girls adore, and the sight...freaked me out.

Yep. It definitely creeped me the hell out. *That's way more zeal than I was after!*

"Then you must teach yourself to protect me from a distance as well."

I reined in my facial muscles before they could form a grimace and just barely maintained a deadpan expression. I endeavored to appear as collected as I could.

"Instead of just staring at me, pay attention to the minuscule hints that something's out of order: the movements and words of the people around you, and all the small details. You tend to focus only on guarding me, but you should take the time, place, and situation into account, so that you can respond in the most effective fashion. I know that you are capable of accomplishing that."

And respect my privacy while you're at it, I prayed with all my heart.

"Lady Rosemary..." Klaus called my name with an expression full of ecstasy.

The hand that he'd placed near his heart began to tremble, and he squeezed it tightly into a fist, like he was restraining a powerful wave of emotion. He let

out a puff of hot air and narrowed his green eyes as if in pain.

The instant I saw that look in his eyes, I gasped. A chill ran down my spine.

While I was taken aback by the disquieting atmosphere, Klaus fixed his gaze on me and bowed his head. “As you command.” He was exceedingly concise when he spoke, but for some reason, those three short words hammered hard against my ears.

I have a bad feeling about this. A very bad feeling...

There’s a phrase, “lose the battle to win the war,” but I couldn’t shake off the thought that I’d just gone and done the opposite—I’d trampled on a principle that I’d adhered to all this time, merely to solve the problem at hand.

But there was no turning back now.

“So, Klaus, you’ll stay here, won’t you?”

“Understood,” he assented happily, showing me a little smile.

I was feeling the onset of a headache caused by Klaus, and I walked away in search of books. The firm sound of my footsteps resounded throughout the not particularly large room.

This was one of several libraries inside the palace, but it was more of an ancillary library, and its collection of books was rather humble. That said, this room housed plenty of valuable texts that couldn’t be found in the main library, which was situated in a different part of the palace. On top of that, only a select few people were allowed to visit this space, so I wouldn’t have to worry about being seen.

Klaus was probably fretting about the large number of blind spots created by bookcases and differing floor levels, but any troublemakers would have a hard time sneaking past the tight security. The windows weren’t large enough for a person to fit through either. The room was safe and quiet. This was the perfect environment for concentrating.

I stopped in front of a large bookcase, then stood on my tiptoes and plucked out a book. Perhaps this volume had undergone regular maintenance because it had relatively few scuff marks, despite how old it looked. When I cradled it in

my arms, a smell particular to antique books tickled my nose.

Climbing a short flight of stairs, I ventured further into the library. I picked up two more books, then went even deeper.

I've got maps, and some texts about medicine, so all that's left is...

Suddenly, I heard a quiet rustling.

"Hmm?"

I'd been looking at only the bookshelves, but now I turned my gaze to follow the noise. On the wall at the end of the aisle was a narrow window which had been designed specifically to prevent sunlight from damaging the books.

A single man was standing still in front of that window. The sight took me by surprise; I hadn't noticed his presence until that moment. Instinctively, I jumped one step back.

However, the man didn't deign to give me a single glance. He turned a page of the book he was reading in silence.

A brazen intruder...he was not. I recognized his face.

His hair was platinum blond, so pale that it could be mistaken for white, and it was dazzling in the faint beams of light from the window. Unlike my own curly hair, his was straight, and the thin strands of it cast shadows on his beautiful forehead. Long lashes framed his eyes, which were the crisp light-blue color of the winter sky. Beneath his chiseled nose, his lips were faint, and his all-too-immaculate face betrayed not the slightest hint of emotion.

His slender frame was covered in a dark-brown justaucorps, woven from high-quality velvet. Though the color was dark, the intricate pattern of golden thread on the seams and cuffs exhibited a stylish flair. His buttoned vest was a bright brown tinged with red. A red gemstone that was as saturated as a pigeon blood ruby acted as a brooch to fasten down his cravat.

The sight of him standing there was as gorgeous as a portrait.

"Are you here to read?" he asked without taking his eyes off of his book. He hadn't criticized me, but even so, my breath caught in my throat for a moment.

"Why are *you* here?" I asked back without answering his question. I'd taken a

deep breath before wringing out my voice to speak, and while it hadn't faltered, I'd sounded quite harsh.

The man waited a few seconds, then shut the book. The snap of the closing pages hadn't been particularly loud, but it'd been enough to trigger my oversensitive nerves, and so my shoulders flinched. He slowly turned his face toward me.

I saw myself reflected in his eyes, which were so light that they were almost colorless.

“Do you find it odd that I'm in my own palace?”

He looked stunning, even when just tilting his head slightly. He should've been in his mid-thirties, but no spots or wrinkles blemished his smooth skin.



Trapped in the gaze of this man with his sculpted good looks, I withheld the urge to turn and run away, and instead shook my head.

“No, father.”

“Right.”

The man in front of me was called Randolph von Velfalt. He was the current king of the Kingdom of Nevel, and my father.

Though I called him “father,” he didn’t feel very much like a parent to me. Our relationship wasn’t one that allowed me to drop in on him whenever I fancied, and I’d never sensed any love from him. More than anything though, I simply wasn’t great at dealing with him.

While I did have a few questions about why the head of the kingdom was wandering around this library without a single attendant to accompany him, I didn’t really want to stick around and find out.

Let’s hurry up and locate what I’m after, then make a break for it, I decided, trying to focus on finding books for my original plan.

But that was where I noticed a problem and fell silent.

Don’t tell me... The shelf I need to look at wouldn’t happen to be the one he’s standing in front of, now would it?

I was certain that documents relating to history were located in the very back of the library. I stole a glimpse to the side. My father was leisurely turning another page of his book and showed no signs of budging from that spot.

Could this be one of those situations where I have to ask him to scoot over? Outta the way. Move it. Please move. My attempt at telepathy appeared to have no effect.

His cold eyes followed the text, and his white, bony fingers turned the pages. Both moved at a leisurely pace, as though nobody was standing beside him. His apathetic face was so undeniably pretty that it was irritating.

“You’ll bore a hole in me, staring so much,” he said, frustration evident in his tone.

“Ah!” How long had I been watching him? I could remember seeing his fingertips flicking between the pages for a fourth or fifth time, but I had stopped counting after that, so I couldn’t be sure.

“If you want something, come out with it,” he said. “You were born with a tongue for a reason.”

What he’d said in his unconcerned tone was incredibly reasonable, but it ticked me off beyond belief. Outwardly, I plastered on a smile, but inwardly, I waved a mental fist at him and thought, *Asshole!*

“My apologies. I was hoping to read some history books.” I gave this explanation hoping that my indirect statement might compel him to get out of the way. But my father didn’t seem like he was going anywhere.

Clearly, he had no intention of relinquishing his spot. He glanced at me and the bookcase in turn, paused for a moment, then spoke.

“From what era?”

“Huh?”

“I’m saying, tell me what books you’re looking for.”

Why would he ask me that? In my confusion, I failed to answer him.

“Are you slow?” he muttered, his face still expressionless.

Oh. My. God! I can’t stand this guy!!!

“The demon lord!” I shouted out of annoyance.

My father went still for a moment. I saw myself reflected in his eyes, which were as colorless as a thin sheet of ice. Caught in those empty eyes, which never betrayed the ups and downs of emotion, I winced.

“You want bedtime stories?” His deep voice was as flat as ever. It revealed no shred of emotion—no anger, no joy.

I paused for a moment, then answered. “I do not.”

For some reason though, his voice terrified me. My heart thumped in fright, as if someone were pressing a knife against my throat.

I might’ve just trodden on the toes of a dragon.

Even so, I couldn't allow that statement to pass without a refutation. I swallowed to ensure that my voice wouldn't falter, and then began to speak. "The demon lord isn't a fictitious character. Nor is he a superstition to scare little children into going to sleep."

"You mean to tell me that he really existed? When the accounts of him are only present in a few old, half-rotten books?"

His derisive phrasing plucked at my nerves.

"Books hold the proof that those who came before us really lived," I shot back at him inadvertently, worked up by his jab. "They're gifts from our forebears, passed down to us over hundreds of years. They're the means to fight back, even after those means have faded from memory."

I couldn't concede that point, all the more because I knew for a fact that the demon lord existed. The people who'd initially fought against the demon lord must've been so frightened. Confronted with a power that surpassed human fathoming, how hadn't they lost faith in their ability to persevere?

Yet they'd gone on living, despite having their loved ones and their homelands stolen from them and even their human dignity trampled in the dirt. I couldn't possibly begin to imagine how much pain and suffering they must have experienced. Even so, they'd resisted. I couldn't help but feel awe and respect for the people who'd continued to fight, unwavering, against such unbelievable might.

The books were the fruit of their struggles, the testament to their miracle, and the account of their lives of endless resistance. It wasn't right that the descendants of those who sealed away the demon lord would come to mock their struggle as pure fantasy.

"I told you that I want to read history books. I'd rather you didn't get that wrong." I faced off against my father, glaring from below his eyeline.

I'd managed to swallow back my fear and put on a bold front, but instead of growing angry or exasperated, my father muttered briefly, "Right."

Huh? Is that it?

Talk about anticlimactic. What happened to the terrifying atmosphere that

made it seem like one ill-chosen word would land me with a summary execution?

The sense of intimidation evaporated into thin air with not a trace left, leaving me to wonder whether I'd imagined it all. My father closed the book in his hands, returned it to the shelf, and then walked past me to leave.

No, really... What was that all about?

"In that case," he said, "stop by my room later."

"Huh?" After his parting words, I let a few seconds of delay slip by. But then I reacted. My eyes grew wide in astonishment and I spun around in a hurry.

"I look after all the books regarding the demon lord," my father continued, as though making small talk. He didn't stop walking. "I'll show you, if that's what you want."

I stood frozen in place, unable to utter a single word in reply, as my father walked off into the distance.

The Reincarnated Princess's Introspection

One afternoon, about two weeks after the encounter with my father, I was heading to Lord Julius's home in a carriage.

"So, has he shown them to you?" Sir Leonhart asked from his seat opposite me.

"Not, uhh...quite yet," I replied, downcast.

Dropping by on my father during the day was out of the question, given how busy he was, but I couldn't seem to pin him down at night either. I'd contemplated barging in before he went to bed, but I couldn't quite work up the courage. If he'd pointed that absolute-zero glare at me and said "have some common sense," I'd have been reduced to tears. Well, not really, but I probably *would* have flipped out.

"He's busy all day long, and I can't summon the courage to interrupt his work. But the sooner the better, I know. I'll try to arrange a time with him within the next few days."

I found myself making excuses. Fearing that I'd exasperated him, I lifted up my eyes to peek at Sir Leonhart, and for some reason he looked troubled. Though, judging by his expression, he was actually worried, not exasperated.

"What's wrong?" I asked timidly.

When I spoke, he pointed his narrowed, jet-black eyes at me, and he seemed to hesitate for a moment.

"Have you informed Prince Christoph of your meeting with His Majesty?"

"I haven't," I replied definitively.

Sir Leonhart's expression grew even more troubled.

Is that a problem? I thought, thrown into worry after seeing the deep knitting of his brows. *Should I have to go out of my way to report every time I meet my real dad? Am I wrong?*

Sir Leonhart had gone quiet, but after noticing that I was starting to grow flustered, he relaxed his expression to ease my unrest.

“U-Ummm...”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I wasn’t criticizing you. Please don’t be so upset.”

My face must’ve looked rather miserable. Sir Leonhart stared into my eyes and smiled, as though comforting a child. I wasn’t overjoyed at receiving the child treatment, but at that moment, relief was the dominant emotion.

Thank goodness. I haven’t annoyed him.

“Your Highness.”

“Yes?”

“Do you have any plans to tell Prince Christoph the story that you confided to me?”

“Huh?” I hadn’t anticipated that, and my jaw dropped. My brain struggled to process his words, and I blinked several times.

What I confided to Sir Leonhart... That had to be the fact that I know the future. Tell that? To Chris? That’s, uhh...

“Absolutely not.” The words slipped out without resistance. “I can’t tell Chris about that. I’d even be more comfortable telling my father.”

Taking in my resolute assertion, Sir Leonhart’s piercing eyes grew wide.

When his gaze was that open and his mouth was slightly ajar, Sir Leonhart looked a little younger than his actual age. I would’ve liked to spend some time admiring that incredibly rare sight, but unfortunately, now wasn’t the time.

I cleared my throat to disguise the fact that I’d been captivated by the look on his face for a second, then resumed the conversation. “I’m sure that Chris will believe me, as far-fetched as my story may be. And I also think that telling him would benefit us when we take action from here on.”

“Then, why won’t you?”

“Chris is my brother, but at the same time he’s the heir to the throne. He can’t afford to have his actions controlled by information that might not even

come true,” I explained. “The future that I saw is already beginning to change, and nothing that I know is certain.”

“Your Highness...”

“And that’s my excuse,” I added, wearing the same serious expression as when I’d come out with my seemingly sound reasoning.

Sir Leonhart’s eyes have been working hard over the last few minutes—narrowing to a squint and then growing as wide as saucers. I guess I’m the one to blame for that whiplash though.

“Assuming that the future I saw does come true, then that will one day put Chris in a position where he’ll have to make use of me for the sake of the kingdom. He’ll need to respond, not as my brother, but as a prince.”

Sir Leonhart offered no refutation. He stayed silent, face stern. It was just like him to refrain from meaningless platitudes; he’d never try to hide harsh reality with a white lie. That sincerity was what I loved about him.

My face mellowed in step with my feelings.

“It’s definitely not because he’s a cold person though. Anything but. I’m sure that my kind brother would fret and anguish before making that decision, because Johan and I are so very important to him.”

I expected that Chris could’ve chosen to make use of me on the night when the palace had been attacked. He could’ve reasoned that he wasn’t manipulating his little sister, merely ensuring that a princess fulfilled her proper role. I’d wanted to be helpful too, so he wouldn’t have needed to feel guilty.

Despite that, Chris had protected me as my brother. He’d hugged me and told me that I should let him indulge me.

Even though there’d never been anyone around to indulge him either. How could I tell someone like that to use me for whatever ends he wanted?

“So my real reasoning is very simple. It’s nothing more than my own selfish wish.”

I’ll stay as just a child for now; I’ll remain his spoiled little sister. That is, until the day when he doesn’t have to use me, when he can trust and rely on me.

“I don’t want Chris to use me, and I don’t want to force him to have to.”

Sir Leonhart gazed at me quietly. The carriage fell silent. Only the clattering of the wheels could be heard, but the muted quiet was not at all unpleasant.

I wonder how much time has passed?

Sir Leonhart breathed a little sigh and smiled. He didn’t seem annoyed at my incredibly self-centered reasoning, and he just narrowed his eyes kindly. “I understand. If that’s what you want, then let’s put an end to that topic.”

“Thank you, Sir Leon.”

“Not at all.” He smiled. “There’s no need to thank me.” Then the graveness returned to his face, and he bowed his head. “I have spoken to you in a manner most unbecoming a servant. I beg your forgiveness.”

This was an apology for having spoken his mind clearly instead of blindly agreeing with me.

I love this aspect of him so much too...I do, but it makes me feel lonely, like he’s pushing me away. Could I have gotten him to interact with me more casually if I weren’t a princess? But if I weren’t a princess, then he wouldn’t be guarding me like he is now.

I felt like crying, because the closer I grew to him, the more I felt a gulf between us.

“Your Highness?”

I hung my head and fell silent, not responding to Sir Leonhart’s call.

I seem to remember that there was a scene in Hidden World where the shrine maiden confides her worries to the royal guard captain.

The shrine maiden’s personal guard, Klaus, suffered an injury while protecting her. In low spirits, she went to the captain for advice. She wailed that she couldn’t stand how powerless she was, and he patiently comforted her by patting her head. He scolded her weakheartedness, and then cheered her on.

Looking back on it, he gave her that treatment precisely because she was the shrine maiden.

The realization sent sharp throngs of pain through my heart.

He did more than just indulge her. According to their stations, he was allowed to scold her, and sometimes to uplift her. He was able to call her name in that lovely low voice of his. She even got to experience having his big hands pat her head.

How wonderful was that? It's not fair. I want to feel his big hands patting my head too. I want him to joke and say, "Aren't you silly?" I want him to poke my forehead and ask, "What am I gonna do with you?" and then take up my selfish request anyway.

"Is anything the matter?" Sir Leonhart looked at me in concern. His courteous manner, and the vast sense of distance that it caused, made me feel even more depressed and dispelled my delusions.

"Sorry, it's nothing."

It was something, but it was nothing that I could do anything about. Just a prayer that would never be answered as long as I was a princess, and a selfish craving for something out of my reach.

As sad as it is, that's reality, I thought. I mustn't keep troubling Sir Leonhart with my unsolvable problems.

So I put on a smile to hide my feelings.

But...

"Your Highness."

"Huh? Y-Yes?"

"It doesn't look at all like nothing to me."

Sir Leonhart refused to let me hide my feelings.

More than that... Am I just imagining things, or does he look a bit angry?

The Reincarnated Princess Makes a Request

Sir Leonhart clasped his hands together between his knees and arched his back. Intimidated by the serious look in his eyes, I instinctively recoiled, but the seat's backrest prevented me from securing much distance.

"Your Highness," he called out to me. The tone of his voice was one step lower than it'd been earlier, and I sat up straight at the sound of it.

"Yes...?"

My worries had proven true. No doubt about it—he was angry with me.

Since I'd been reborn into this world, had I ever been told off by anyone? I could hardly remember even one instance, but I could recall my past life and what a scolding felt like back then. The look in Sir Leonhart's eyes and the timbre of his voice mirrored those of my elders, like my parents and teachers, when they'd chastise and admonish me.

But I couldn't concentrate enough to take a sentimental stroll down memory lane. All that I could do was hunch my shoulders and wait for Sir Leonhart to speak.

Honestly, I was a little frightened... Okay, a *lot*.

"I'm aware that this is improper, but I would like your permission to speak my mind. Is that all right?"

"Yesss." My voice sounded pathetic.

"Yes" has been the only thing to leave my lips for the last few minutes. Who knew I could demonstrate my full vocal range with just that one word? I thought about this, hoping to distract myself from the present predicament.

But I couldn't keep it up. How could I? Sir Leonhart had asked "is that all right?" but the words were a question in form only. It'd been a declaration, a statement of fact. I could practically hear a second voice dubbed over his, announcing, "I'm gonna say something, do you mind? Don't bother answering."

“You said earlier that you wouldn’t tell Prince Christoph,” he started. “I judge that this means I’m the only one able to directly assist you with this matter.” His eyes prompted me for confirmation, and I nodded.

He looked at me as my head bounced up and down like a bobblehead toy and then squinted his eyes shrewdly. “And yet, you’re still keeping things to yourself. I am the only one who knows your circumstances. If you won’t turn to me for help, then who *will* you turn to?”

My whole body jumped after being exposed to his sharp gaze. Sir Leonhart noticed me gasp, but he maintained his rigid expression.

“You are obviously industrious, but when you encounter a difficult problem, you are inclined to try and persevere by yourself before enlisting the assistance of others. Perhaps you find a request like that to be insincere, or you think that asking for aid conflicts with your sense of virtue. However, virtue is not always the correct answer. Do you understand?” He again asked me for confirmation.

I gave a small, silent nod. Strangely, I didn’t feel resentful. Maybe it was because his words carried the weight of life experience, or perhaps it was because, on the inside, I was too old for childish indignation. Whichever it was, Sir Leonhart’s words sank in.

I’d stayed perfectly still for a few moments, continuing to look down, but Sir Leonhart didn’t try to rush my answer. He only stared at me intently with those jet-black eyes. It would’ve been easier to respond if he’d just growled, “We’ve already been over this!” I could’ve used his angry tone as an excuse to not feel so guilty. But that wouldn’t do.

“C-Could I a—” I bit my tongue, then paused and took a deep breath. It was a little late to be worrying about the impression I was exuding, but I *was* concerned that my point wouldn’t come across clearly.

I continued slowly, my voice trembling. “Could I ask something selfish?”

“Go on.” A gentle smile crept into his eyes.

I’d appreciate your acquiescence more if you could stop beaming so joyfully, like you’re talking to a small child. It was sad, but this was my reality nonetheless. At the moment, all that I amounted to was an awkward kid who

couldn't even ask for a favor properly.

If this is the case, then I'd better take full advantage of it.

"I'd like you to treat me more crudely."

Sir Leonhart froze for about ten seconds.

Hmm, that's not quite it. This isn't as easy to put into words as I thought it would be.

"Pardon?" He asked me to repeat myself, his face still rigid.

Looks like I did mess up the phrasing.

"As in, a rougher manner... No, that's not quite it. Sloppily... Carelessly?"

After hearing that succession of rather haphazard words come spewing out of my mouth, Sir Leonhart pressed a hand to his forehead and cast his gaze downward.

"Those all mean more or less the same thing..." he responded, trailing off.
"Your Highness, could you let me in on what you're thinking?"

His subsequent sigh was brimming with exasperation, and he peered at me through the gaps in his fingers with a look of disbelief.

"I feel that your treatment of me is far too courteous, Sir Leon."

I thought that might annoy him even more, but Sir Leonhart's almond eyes shot wide open. He was taken aback by my words, like they'd caught him completely by surprise.

"It's standard for the royal guard captain to treat a princess with courtesy," I stated. "I know that. But I can't help but feel a sense of distance between us."

"Your Highness..."

I hung my head, hearing the hesitation that had seeped into Sir Leonhart's voice, but nonetheless continued to explain myself.

"You chastised me earlier. While it was somewhat frightening because nobody's ever gotten mad at me before...it's much preferable to just being pampered. I want you to chastise me when I make mistakes from now on. And I don't want you to preface what you say with 'I'm aware that this is improper,'

either. You could flick me on the forehead too. That wouldn't bother me at all."

"I could never!" exclaimed Sir Leonhart.

"That's what I'm saying I don't like." I looked up at him reproachfully after his immediate refusal. He went quiet, appearing ashamed. "Nobody ever comments on anything I do. So, from time to time, I feel like I lose track of whether I'm even doing the right thing. I want someone to criticize and compliment me, like I'm a normal girl... And if possible, I want that someone to be you."

He looked stunned. I could see the desperate look on my face reflected in his wide-open eyes. Though he was acting bewildered, I wasn't about to let up. I couldn't relax this assault, or else my desired outcome would slip through my fingers.

It's time to make it or break it. Go for it, Rose!

"When we're in public, I don't mind you treating me the same way that you always have. But I'd like you to be yourself, even if it's just when we're alone together. Please, let me get to know you, just a little bit more."

Sir Leonhart stayed frozen, his eyes still fixed on me.

Well, can't blame him for that. It's only natural to be thrown into disarray when a little princess lavishes you with what essentially amounts to a confession of love. No one would know how to react.

After a few seconds, Sir Leonhart returned to his senses and covered his face with his large hands. I had no idea what he was thinking, since he was looking down and I couldn't see his expression.

"Sir Leon?"

"Argh..." He lifted his head up with a groan.

"Hm?"

His brows were furrowed in a look of displeasure, but his cheeks had a slight red tint, so I wasn't particularly afraid. Sir Leonhart ruffled his hair violently and let out a deep sigh.

Uh-oh, did I piss him off? I thought, turning pale.

“I’m not angry.” Sir Leonhart looked at me and smiled wryly.

Thank God, I thought, but a different doubt crept into my mind at the last moment, preventing me from feeling relieved. “Huh? Did I say that last thought out loud?”

“It was written all over your face,” remarked Sir Leonhart. “You’re not terribly good at hiding your emotions.”

No way... And there I was, convinced of my identity as a blank-faced girl.

When I hurriedly grabbed at my cheeks, Sir Leonhart laughed like the energy to stop himself had drained away. “You’re an unusual one. Women tend to appreciate courteous treatment. I never would’ve thought that you’d ask me to treat you carelessly... You really do have a gift for leading me around by the nose.”

“W-Well...”

“You should be proud. You’re about the only one who can wrap me around your finger.” His features spread into a sweet, mischievous grin. His large hand then patted my head.

For a moment, I failed to grasp what had happened. My eyes opened as wide as they could, and he gave an amused chuckle.

“Please spare me from having to flick your forehead though, *Princess*.”

At that moment, I could say with confidence that I was the happiest person in the world.

The Reincarnated Princess Thinks Deeply

Yay me! My hard work has paid off!

My overladen brain was out of order right now, and it only managed to produce a thought appropriate for a child of my physical age.

“Your face has gone bright red,” Sir Leonhart pointed out, and I hurriedly hid my expression behind my fingers.

Come to mention it, my cheeks do feel unusually hot.

I pressed my hands to my face, switching between the palms and the backs, in a desperate attempt to sap the heat away. Watching my antics, Sir Leonhart burst out laughing.

That’s not very nice of you! You’re obscuring your mouth with your hand, but I can see your shoulders shaking, so I know that you’re laughing. Don’t try to fool me by clearing your throat—I can see right through you!

“You’re laughing at me, aren’t you?” I asked.

I don’t think I could’ve helped my resentful look. Toying with the feelings of a girl in love wasn’t acceptable behavior, and I wouldn’t bend the rules, not even for Sir Leonhart.

“I’m sorry.” He apologized without a fight, but his eyes were still laughing.

Maybe he’s actually a bit of a teaser? That thought popped into my mind, and I asked Sir Leonhart. He replied instead with a question.

“Do you dislike me as I am?”

“Not at all,” I answered at once, and Sir Leonhart’s eyes widened a little. It seemed that he hadn’t expected that.

Come to think of it, the thought never crossed my mind when I was playing Hidden World—it might be nice to see a more playful side of him.

The game’s Leonhart von Orsein was, to me, the ideal adult man personified.

He was a kind, bighearted, and indulgent person. I'd never thought that he might have another side.

I don't think I would've disliked him had I seen this mischievous personality in the game, but I'd have found it strange. That's not the guard captain I know, I would've thought, and I'd have foisted my expectations onto him. But, thinking about it now, the royal guard captain from Hidden World and this Sir Leonhart are already different people in my mind. After all, I don't feel let down when this man shatters my mental image of him.

Far from it—I absolutely love when that happens.

Like the moment I discovered that he's scary when I get him mad, or when I noticed he's a worrier and pretty inflexible, or even when I found out that he's a bit of a teaser. I want him to reveal more sides of himself, to teach me more about who he really is. My heart's so full of passion for him that it borders on creepy...

"I'm glad that you're being yourself." Hearing my honest feelings, Sir Leonhart made a face like he'd mistakenly swallowed something that he shouldn't have. I was confused about why he'd pull such an expression, but then he looked into my eyes and put on a troubled smile.

He relaxed his shoulders. "I'm no match for you," he muttered to himself.

"Huh?"

"Right," he said, changing the subject. "That's enough idle conversation. Let's delve into the main subject."

I shot him a questioning glance to try and figure out what he had meant, but he'd put a firm end to the topic. Apparently, he didn't plan on explaining.

"Okay."

I wasn't happy about being given the runaround, but he was right—we didn't have time to spare for idle chitchat. I'd gone to the trouble of leaving Klaus behind, so I needed to ensure that the time I spent with Sir Leonhart was productive.

Although, speaking as a girl in love, there was nothing idle about that previous

conversation.

“We were planning on developing countermeasures for diseases this time, weren’t we?” Sir Leonhart asked, putting on a more serious expression.

“That’s right.” I nodded.

Broadly speaking, three calamities posed a looming threat in the future: the demon lord’s resurrection, the war with Lapter, and the spread of plague. I’d already informed Sir Leonhart of these. It’d been quite the challenge to explain everything under the guise of a dream I’d had, but he’d borne with me patiently.

At present, he was conducting an investigation into the demon lord’s avatar, Michael von Diebolt. There was no action we could take against Lapter at this point in time. So, by process of elimination, we’d decided to do some brainstorming on how to counteract communicable diseases.

Sir Leonhart retrieved a map from his breast pocket.

“May I sit next to you?” he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he stood up from his place opposite me and sat down beside me.

“Wha?” I gawked at the sequence of actions in astonishment. My mind went blank and my mouth dangled wide open. His handsome face was right by my side.

T-T-Too close...!!!

My nerves went haywire and I froze solid.

In stark contrast to my floundering, Sir Leonhart had completely switched to business mode. His facial expression was as earnest as could be, and he looked down at the now-open map.

I began to feel ashamed for getting so worked up. *Relax, relax*, I chanted, like a spell in my mind to quell the rapid thumping of my heart.

“You said that the plague spread from the south, but do you know the precise location?”

Keenly conscious of him looking at me, I began to sweat from my palms. I plastered on a normal facial expression so that he wouldn’t perceive my unrest

and inhaled a big gulp of air.

“I don’t know exactly where,” I responded, “but I suspect that it most likely began in the south-southwest, near the border with Vint.” I pointed at the area as I spoke. I’d gradually begun to regain my cool by focusing on the map.

Our country, Nevel, was located in the central region of a bird-wing-shaped continent. In the south, there was a peninsula that jutted out into the ocean, and it was blessed with a good climate. Temperate land constituted most of the other regions too, with only the northernmost reaches seeing heavy snowfall.

I loved how comfortable it was to live in the warm weather, but it came with downsides too. Viruses that didn’t flourish in cold places could easily travel north across the continent, almost all the way up through Nevel.

“You mean, the plague won’t start in the peninsula?” Sir Leonhart asked, voice laced with suspicion.

“That’s right.” I nodded heavily.

Certainly, febrile diseases circulated more readily in the tropical climate of the peninsula. But the locals appeared to have built up a resistance to them, and any outbreaks would always fizzle out without many casualties.

Moreover, the stretch of land connecting the peninsula to the continent was exceedingly narrow, constricted like an hourglass. Although there was obviously *some* interaction with the world beyond the peninsula, these locals possessed their own unique culture and preferred not to leave their territory, so diseases rarely transferred across the continental mainland.

“Judging from my dream, I believe that the war between Vint and Skelluts played a part in causing the disease to spread,” I said.

“Your reasoning?”

“The first is timing. The initial spread of the disease occurred less than a year after the outbreak of that war. Secondly, my premonition showed those people persecuted as disease-carriers, and they had a different skin color than the people of Nevel.”

“A different skin color...” Sir Leonhart rested his chin on his hand and sank

into thought. After a short pause, he arrived at the same conclusion as I had.

“Refugees?”

I nodded in agreement and continued to speak. “I’m told that the great forests sprawling across southern Vint are home to a race of dark-skinned people. I suspect that they might’ve wound up in Nevel after being driven from their homeland.”

“Indeed. Assuming that their forest was burned in the fighting, they’d most likely aim to cross the border, rather than flee to the north where the war still raged. If the refugees’ arrival in Nevel coincided with the outbreak of the plague, then it wouldn’t be strange for these conspicuous outsiders to be labeled as the culprits.”

“I agree.”

“Do you personally believe them to be the cause? Or do you think it’s a false accusation?” inquired Sir Leonhart.

“It’s dangerous to jump to conclusions. However, my thoughts are that they probably carried the source of the disease with them.”

Earth’s jungles harbored a host of viruses. The same was probably true of this world. The dark-skinned people who’d lived in that area for generations had the natural immunity to withstand contracting a severe form of the illness, since they were used to being exposed to the virus. Unfortunately, the people of Nevel had no resistance to this sickness, and they wouldn’t be so lucky.

The only fortunate thing was that the disease didn’t have a high case fatality rate; however, an insufficient supply of medicine, as well as general fatigue from the war, would’ve accelerated the spread of the disease.

“I concur.” Sir Leonhart expressed his agreement. “The forests of the south harbor a great many unknown diseases, just like our country’s peninsula. Though the chances of Vint starting a war are practically nonexistent at the moment, it would serve us to develop countermeasures for this disease as urgently as possible.”

I lifted my head upon hearing his last remark. When I glanced his way, our eyes met.

“So we need to hurry, even though we succeeded in averting the war?” I asked.

I did understand the need for countermeasures because the threat hadn’t completely disappeared... *But why the rush? Sure, I’d love to deal with it early on, but we have plenty of other tasks to accomplish.*

My confusion must’ve been apparent on my face, and Sir Leonhart nodded to me, then clarified, “The flames of war aren’t the only threat to the forest’s existence.”

According to Sir Leonhart’s explanation, commerce between Vint and Flanmer had increased following the disappearance of the menace that lay between them—Skelluts.

“Flanmer and Vint...”

Located to the south of Skelluts and the southwest of Vint, Flanmer was a large country bordered by ocean on three sides. Many of its subjects worked as fishermen and international merchants, so naturally, the country boasted a flourishing shipbuilding industry. I could only imagine one link connecting Flanmer to the possible disappearance of the forest.

“The trees are being chopped down to use as lumber for shipbuilding,” I mumbled to myself.

The country of Flanmer was large, but its southern half was covered by a vast expanse of desert. Consequently, Flanmer produced inferior quantities of wooden materials domestically, and instead imported the majority of their lumber supply from abroad. They’d imported wood from Vint before, but it had to be transported by sea, since maritime trade routes avoided passing through the nation of Skelluts. Ships were also costly and could only carry so much cargo per voyage.

But now that the land routes were open for trade, both of those inconveniences had been resolved in an instant.

“You catch on quickly.” Sir Leonhart had deciphered my muttering. He beamed, as though to say “bravo.”

I very much appreciated the compliment, but this wasn’t the time to get

carried away.

It's no challenge to work out that this new trade dynamic will become a problem.

"I suppose that stopping them is impossible?" I asked. Just because we had an alliance didn't mean they'd let a foreign princess chime in on the issue. I knew that fact very well, but I'd asked anyway, in the dim hope that there might be some way to communicate this message.

However, Sir Leonhart wasn't the sort of person to make empty gestures of consolation. "I doubt they'll listen until after they've experienced some of the negative aftereffects."

I shut my mouth upon hearing his exceedingly logical view; I had no counterargument. It grieved me to hear, but that was how I saw things too.

I have no time to waste on being depressed. There's a lot to be done.

"Well then—huh?!"

Just as I'd recuperated and opened my mouth to speak, the horses neighed, and the carriage swerved violently.

"Your Highness!!!" At once, Sir Leonhart pulled me into his arms and unsheathed his sword from its scabbard.

The carriage slammed to a sudden halt after the jolt.

Sir Leonhart propped me up to prevent me from tumbling off of my seat. The manly, handsome knight next to me was wearing a fierce expression, and the air in the carriage had grown thick with tension.

What in the world just happened?!

"I'll take a look and see what's going on," he said, his voice deep. "Stay inside, Your Highness."

I nodded in silence.

Sir Leonhart released me and placed his hand on the carriage door. But the instant before he could throw it open, a voice called from outside.

"Pardon me! Is anybody hurt?!"

“Her Highness is unharmed,” Sir Leonhart called out beyond the door, shielding me behind his back. “What just happened?”

“Yes, ummm...” the voice responded. “Somebody jumped in front of the carriage out of nowhere.”

Sir Leonhart opened the door. Outside stood a guard and the pale-faced driver. I expected that my face looked just as white as his.

What does he mean, someone jumped out? W-We didn't hit them, did we? I didn't feel a big shock of impact, so...we're good, right?!

“Is anyone wounded?” Sir Leonhart asked.

“We swerved out of the way, so the pedestrian should be fine...”

Sir Leonhart debarked the carriage and closed the door behind him, all while speaking with the driver. Left all alone inside, I had to piece together what was happening outside from what I could hear of their conversation. I found out from the intermittent fragments that the person who'd jumped in front of us was a boy.

Thank God—from the sound of things, he's all right. I wiped the sweat from my forehead in relief.

But soon, the conversation cut off midway. Though I couldn't sense anything ominous, there *was* something amiss in Sir Leonhart's voice for some reason.

I wonder why... That change has really caught my attention.

“Your Highness.” After a short while, Sir Leonhart called to me from outside the carriage.

“Y-Yes?!” I hurried back to my seat and pretended that I hadn't been glued to the door eavesdropping. Princesses must never do that, after all.

“I'm afraid there's a slight complication.”

I was embarrassed at the squeaky noise I'd made in my panic, but the mood in the air was too grave to be worrying about something so trivial. My face stiffened in response to the serious tone of Sir Leonhart's voice.

Nonetheless, I sat up straight and responded. “I'll hear your report.”

Since Sir Leonhart had decided that this matter was complicated, I didn't expect to be of any use in dealing with it. However, I held the highest social rank in our party. In other words, I was the one responsible, and therefore, I had to assess and react to the situation hastily.

In contrast to my eager attitude, Sir Leonhart fell into a troubled silence, and then whispered quietly, "The boy that jumped into the road has turned out to be the son of Viscount Diebolt."

Diebolt... That name rings a bell.

I lowered my eyes and pondered. The name sounded familiar, but I couldn't remember why. *Diebolt*, I repeated in my head, *Diebolt*. I trudged through my memories.

"Ah!"

Suddenly, visuals from *Hidden World* entered my ruminating mind: A man with the moon in the background, his hair long and black with blue overtones, and monolid, almond eyes of the same color. His faint lips were eternally pressed into an archaic smile, and it was impossible to read his emotions. He'd worn bright white priestly vestments on his slender body, and on top of that, a white overcoat with gold at the hem. A golden stole hung from his neck.

Though his appearance was godly, and his gaze bewitching...this man—Michael von Diebolt—had a dangerous charm which could lead someone astray with a single glance.

Ah, that's the one, Michael!

I basked for just a second in that satisfying feeling of having successfully remembered something, but then, I turned deathly pale.

That's the demon lord! The son of Viscount Diebolt—that's the demon lord!!!

Although, to split hairs, Michael was just the demon lord's avatar, and not the demon lord himself.

My feeling of shock was so intense that my mind no longer had the capacity to spare for little details like that. Without giving me a chance to mentally prepare myself, a bombshell had just landed at my feet. At this point, I lost any

trace of composure and panicked.

In the end, I tried to deny reality.

Didn't the Diebolts have two sons?

"Is it the eldest son?" I tried.

"He's Michael von Diebolt."

Yep, figures!

Sir Leonhart hammered a polite nail in the coffin of my vain struggle. I felt like I could sense a hint of exasperation in his voice.

"Your Highness, there is no danger, so could you step out of the carriage?" Sir Leonhart proposed this, perhaps hoping to hurry the situation along.

That's right. Michael and the demon lord are different people. The boy outside the carriage right now isn't Michael the demon lord, who'd given me goosebumps with his deranged thoughts and ominous utterances. He'll probably look the exact same, but his personality will be completely different...

I hope.

"Very well." I took a deep breath.

I opened the door, accepted the hand offered to me, and followed it out of the carriage. I was met by the guard and the driver, who were both bowing their heads. Alongside them was an unfamiliar boy.

Who's he?

I scanned the boy up and down questioningly. I seemed to recall Sir Leonhart saying that Michael was there, but I couldn't spot him anywhere—the young man whose chilling good looks had paired so perfectly with the night, the moon, and blood was nowhere to be seen.

His unkempt black hair was cut at shoulder-length. It had no luster, and uneven tufts stuck out here and there. His monolid, almond eyes, which peeked through his long bangs, were staring at the ground, and beneath them were dark, heavy bags.

His thin body was shrouded in black vestments, like a cassock that priests

wear, with no decorative accessories at all. On top of that, his skin was sickly pale, and his arms and legs were as thin as sticks. His tall stature was diminished by his poor posture, which gave him a stoop.

He's like a greasy-haired stray cat. That was my first impression of him. His face *did* look attractive upon close inspection, and a likeness to Michael the demon lord *was* present in each of its constituent parts. But his countenance, his attitude, and the impression he gave were the total opposite.

His brows had knitted themselves into nervous knots, and his eyes darted restlessly in every direction. His muffled voice escaped in meaningless whimpers. No matter how I looked at him, I couldn't picture him as the supremely self-confident demon lord.



I stood there dumbfounded for a while as the boy fidgeted uncomfortably under my intense staring.

I'd expected him to have a slightly different personality and nature to the demon lord, but I never imagined that he'd be such a nervous wreck.

"Your Highness," Sir Leonhart prompted me, perhaps taking pity on the boy who seemed on the verge of tears.

An adorable *meow* piped up in support.

Huh? Why's there a cat here?

I took a closer look at Michael and saw that he was holding a cat in his arms. It had a coat of pitch-black fur, which is why I'd failed to immediately spot it against the black of the boy's vestments. As I stared into the cat's blue jewel-like eyes, I saw myself reflected there, and the black cat tilted its head in puzzlement.

My lips widened into a smile at the cute sight.

"Apparently he jumped into the carriage's path to protect the cat from being run over."

"I see." I transferred my gaze from the cat to the boy, and he cast his eyes down while turning bright red. "Are you hurt?"

"N-N-No, I'm f-f-fine." He stuttered immensely and replied with a squeak as quiet as a mouse.

He wouldn't have been called dashing, what with the way that he'd forced his eyes shut and stared at the ground... But he did seem cute, like a little critter. Although I *was* cognizant of the fact that this compliment wasn't the best choice of words to describe a boy older than me.

But... How do I put this? I wanna play with him until he drops.

Like, I kinda wanna mess with him and watch him squirm. Or should I say that I want to observe his panicked, hopeless floundering with heartfelt glee? That I just want to have fun with him?

I'm not a sadist. This bears repeating, so I'll state it again: I am not a sadist!

“M-M-My name is Michael von D-Diebolt, and I’m a priest-in-twaining.” He tripped over his words.

A “priest-in-twaining,” eh? Ooh, I just wanna gobble him up!

He seemed to have noticed his own mistake because he blushed even deeper and tears began to shimmer in his eyes. The redness stood out all the more on his pale skin. I was almost worried that he’d get a nosebleed if he got any redder.

“I-I did not know that this was a royal carriage, d-do beg my forgiveness—I m-mean... I beg your forgiveness.”

Michael bowed his head, tears threatening to fall from his eyes.

Don’t worry, you’re doing great, kid. It was cute, and that’s all that matters. Besides, commanding me to beg your forgiveness has a nice, noble flair to it.

“Fortunately, none of us were injured.” I smiled, gesturing for him not to worry about it, and the boy flinched. *Why’re you flinching?*

His nicely shaped ears slowly dyed crimson.

So you can still turn redder, I observed, my expectations defied, and Michael glanced behind himself. He clearly wanted to get away, but I needed him to stick around for a little while longer. I was slightly curious about why he was out here on his own; we were still in town but quite far away from the temple, too far for him to be running errands.

“Why is a priest of the Great Temple in a place like this?” Sir Leonhart asked the question in my stead.

Does he think something’s up too?

“Huh?” Taken by surprise, Michael stared at Sir Leonhart and me in wide-eyed confusion. His face turned from red to white in an instant. “I-I-I’m not d-d-doing anything b-bad!”

Under the misconception that he was being accused of something, Michael shook his head from side to side with impressive force. He was acting incredibly suspicious, but I didn’t get the impression that he was hiding anything nefarious.

He's like a hamster running in circles, out of its mind. While it is cute, if we pressure him any more he'll probably have a stress overload and die from the shock.

"I wasn't accusing you of anything," Sir Leonhart said, and he put on a bright, businesslike smile. "I merely thought that we could be of some assistance, if you were in need of any."

Michael slumped and let out a sigh of relief. He hugged the cat tightly in his arms, perhaps unconsciously. The friendly-looking cat wasn't making any attempts to flee.

"Well," explained Michael, "I finished my work and had the rest of the day off, so I was visiting the orphanage."

As Michael told it, after he'd finished his duties at the Great Temple, he'd taken it upon himself to walk to an orphanage and help out there.

"Although, I suppose I'm just doing it for my own self-satisfaction," he added bashfully.

What is this kid, an angel? What a great boy! I wanna pet him. I wanna reach my arms out and tousle his hair. I wanna tease him until he starts looking troubled and asks me to stop.

"No, I think that's very admirable of you." I put on a model smile while keeping my hands in check so that they couldn't move on their own to satisfy my urges.

Michael's face lit up. He must've been delighted to hear an expression of approval for his actions. A light pink colored his cheeks, revealing his excited emotions. It was a softer color, unlike the crimson embarrassment from earlier.

"T-To tell the truth," Michael said gleefully, "I'd like to visit more far-flung villages, not just the capital. Like the ones near the borders... But I've been struggling to get permission."

I'd been nodding along to Michael with the loving attentiveness I used with small children, but I froze partway through.

"Far-flung villages," he said? So the war didn't happen, and the plague hasn't

spread yet. But is the future still unchanged despite all of that?

This priest-in-training was more driven than his introverted appearance would suggest, and he was adamant about traveling the country as soon as he received permission.

I fell silent, my smile still plastered to my face.

This is bad. This is very bad.

I knew that something needed to be done, but my thoughts buckled under the pressure, and no good plans sprang to mind. If we parted ways now, it'd be difficult to make contact with him again. I had no pretense for visiting him,, and I was technically a princess—just too high-class to be given the freedom of waltzing out of the palace whenever I wanted. I needed to forge a connection with him this instant.

But I couldn't think up a good enough excuse to justify chucking him into the carriage and snatching him up when he wasn't even wounded.

I could propose to treat the cat's wounds? He'd probably just decline the offer. How about I say I'll drop him off at the orphanage because it's on the way? No good. I'm headed to Lord Julius's residence. That's the opposite direction of the capital.

What should I do?

"Your Highness, I have a request." Sir Leonhart turned to me and broke his silence.

A request? The word took me by surprise, and I glanced at him questioningly. When I did, he winked twice, slowly, signaling to me.

"There have recently been reports of sightings of suspicious individuals in this vicinity. It would be regrettable if something were to befall the priest while he returns home by himself. With Your Highness's permission, I would have the priest accompany us, and then we would escort him back to the Great Temple once you have concluded your business. What do you say?"

"Ah! I give you my permission." I grinned, withholding the urge to give him a thumbs-up.

Nicely done, Sir Leonhart. Good job, you're the best!

Sir Leonhart respectfully bowed his head as I showered him with compliments in my mind.

"Thank you," he said.

All right, so we've successfully snatched him up, and now we'll convince him to cancel his traveling while we're on the road! And if that doesn't pan out, all I have to do is arrange another date to meet him!

"Wait... What?" Michael floundered, unable to follow the train of events. In his arms, the black cat purred without a care in the world.

Soon, the carriage arrived at a large, stone-crafted mansion. The owner's gentility was evident in the color scheme of the manor, which possessed a sense of unity without appearing gaudy, and it matched well with the surrounding area. We left the spacious entrance hall, passed through a corridor decorated with paintings, and were then led to a parlor.

A man was waiting inside, and he rose to his feet upon our arrival. His eyes widened slightly when he spotted me, but they soon relaxed into a kind smile.

"I've been eagerly awaiting your visit, Lady Mary," he said.

"It's been too long, Lord Julius."

This good-looking man was Lord Julius zu Eigel. He took my hand and performed the gesture of kissing it most elegantly.

He was the uncle of one of the suitor characters, George, and was also a proficient merchant currently expanding his network throughout the continent. He'd been a great help back when I was working to improve the health of George's mother, and we'd kept in touch ever since, primarily to satisfy my personal urges.

"It really has," he said. Then, with a mischievous smile, he added, "In the time we've spent apart, you've once again become even more beautiful. You're much too fabulous a lady now, so I couldn't possibly swoop you up in my arms."

Oooh, we have a flatterer in the house.

The smoothly delivered compliment left me feeling admiration rather than bashfulness. Offering his praise in such a pleasant, tasteful way must've come part and parcel with his virtues. That skill was something that Morwitz, George, and the rest of the men in the Eigel family lacked. Morwitz tended to convey his emotions through his behavior, while George was still just a naive boy.

Julius was tall and handsome, quite the posh gentleman, and rich besides. *Moreover, though he's the second son, his family lineage does contain the marquis title. It's a wonder that this prize specimen is still on the market at twenty-eight years old. I suppose maybe he just doesn't want to settle down.*

"I apologize for calling in on you so suddenly," I said. "I know that you're a busy man, so I hope you didn't have to cancel any arrangements."

"Not to worry. I was delighted to hear from you."

So he said, but I was aware that I'd been more than a little forceful in organizing my appointment. I didn't like to intrude on his work, but it was quite difficult to pin down a man who hopped all over the world.

He loved his brother's family, and he'd always stayed as close to them as possible out of concern for his sickly sister-in-law, stubborn brother, and shy nephew. But now that those problems were gone, he'd joyfully begun to roam the world in order to accelerate the growth of his business.

"Besides, not long ago, I received a warning from George telling me to spend a little more time at home," Lord Julius admitted.

After hearing that, I asked without thinking, "From George?" *I can't even picture George giving Lord Julius a scolding.*

"Yes. Recently, he's been losing his youthful charm. While I'm delighted that my nephew's growing up, I could do without his nitpicking."

I fell silent.

"Having trouble imagining that?" Lord Julius asked, reacting to my stumped expression with a wry smile. "I'm sure the George you know is like a sweet and timid little girl. You'll be in for a surprise when you see him."

I was close enough with George's mother, Emma, to hold the occasional tea

party with her. But George was always so busy that I never managed to see him when I visited the Eighls. The last time that I'd met with him had been on his ninth birthday.

Emma had told me that he was now taller and more boyish, but I couldn't imagine it at all. George was two years older than me, making him thirteen at the moment. Certainly, boys that age could change a lot in four years, but I wasn't sure—could that amount of time be enough to alter his personality as well?

"He ought to be at work in the spare room today," Lord Julius said. "I've kept him in the dark about your visit, so why don't we sneak over and startle him later?"

Lord Julius pressed his index finger to his lips and lowered his voice like he was letting me in on something confidential. He looked to be enjoying himself very much. *A respectable, full-grown man who still possesses that boyishness... As always, Lord Julius is full of gap moe.*

"Oh, let's," I replied, speaking softly to match Lord Julius's tone, and he put on a happy, full-faced grin.

"I have many souvenirs for you as well. Every time a rare foodstuff or seasoning catches my eye, I think of your face."

"Huh?"

"Will you take a look?"

"I will!" *Food! Seasoning!* He'd hooked me, and my eyes sparkled.

Every product that Lord Julius procured was a rarity in Nevel. Occasionally, something that reminded me of Japan would be included with the rest, and deep down, I hoped that someday soon I'd be able to get my hands on glutinous rice.

I cheerfully stepped forward to let Lord Julius guide me away, but then I heard a hesitant voice from behind me.

"Ummm."

His voice was so quiet that it almost escaped my notice, but the moment I

heard it, I remembered he was there. I turned around to see a boy standing around idly.

Oh, that's right, Michael's with me, I remembered, turning pale. How awful of me, dragging him along and then forgetting and abandoning him.

"Who's this young man?" Lord Julius asked, following my eyeline. He'd noticed Michael as well.

"Pardon the delayed introduction," I said. "This is my friend, Michael."

"Y-Yes, um... M-Michael von Diebolt. I-I'm a priest-in-training at the Great Temple." He was suddenly the center of attention, and the spotlight caused Michael to break out into shakes. His eyes flitted around the room, and he bowed his head deeply.

I'm so sorry, Michael! Both for abruptly forcing you to tag along and for making you feel out of place. Also, for treating you like you're my friend, despite us having just met. I really am sorry. I couldn't think of any better way to introduce you...

"This is Lord Julius zu Eigel," I said to Michael. "Lord Julius, I'm terribly sorry for the intrusion, on top of making you change your arrangements..." My words trailed off, but Lord Julius only nodded pleasantly.

"I don't mind."

I felt truly remorseful for taking advantage of his generosity, but this was preferable to having Michael wait in the carriage.

I let out an unwitting sigh of relief, and my eyes met those of Sir Leonhart, who stood near the wall. He was wearing a bitter smile on his manly, good-looking face, and was probably exasperated at me. I'd allowed myself to be mesmerized by the tantalizing prospects dangled in front of my eyes and had lost all sight of our objective. Thinking of that, I returned to my senses.

Lord Julius followed my gaze and spotted Sir Leonhart. "Come to mention it," he said, "your usual guard is not accompanying you today."

"My name is Leonhart von Orsein. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

As Sir Leonhart introduced himself, Lord Julius's eyes grew wide. "Ah hah! So

you're the captain of the royal guard?!"

Now that I think about it, these two might've never met.

Whenever I visited Lord Julius for personal reasons, like to acquire seasonings and ingredients, Klaus had always been the one guarding me. I *had* brought Sir Leonhart as my guard once, four years ago, for George's birthday party, but I seemed to recall Lord Julius being absent that day. Apparently, he'd been stalled in another country because poor weather had grounded the ships.

"I'm Julius zu Eigel. It's an honor to be in the presence of the renowned Black Lion." Lord Julius extended a hand to Sir Leonhart, his eyes glowing like a boy who'd met his hero in the flesh. Sir Leonhart smiled awkwardly when they shook hands.

I could remember Sir Leonhart pulling the same face when he'd first met Marquis and Marchioness Eigel. They'd given him a reaction similar to Lord Julius's.

Maybe Sir Leonhart doesn't particularly like standing out? Or maybe it's the Black Lion nickname that he's not fond of?

Whatever the case, I decided that I shouldn't let this topic drag on, so I brought up the main agenda. "Lord Julius, I'd like to consult with you about a certain matter."

"*Medicine?*" Lord Julius repeated what I'd said, his eyes wide.

"Yes."

My visit to the Eigel estate wasn't to collect food and seasonings; rather, we needed to come up with countermeasures against an epidemic.

In *Hidden World*, patients suffering a severe form of the disease had emerged one after another, throughout every corner of Nevel. Fatigue from the war had been partially to blame, as was the lack of treatment and personnel, but the absence of *effective* medicine had probably also been one of the reasons for the repeated outbreaks. Which is to say, I had suspicions that Nevel's current stock of medicine lacked potency against this particular disease.

It was unclear whether a wonder drug even existed to begin with, but I thought it best to get Lord Julius's advice before attempting to look for one abroad.

"The threat of Skelluts has subsided," I explained, "and the movement of people to and from the countries in the southwest has picked up. However, an increase in the circulation of people could bring more than just coin and culture to Nevel. This includes some rather unpleasant things." I employed a pretense that I'd constructed beforehand since I couldn't very well talk about something as ridiculous as a premonition.

"Unpleasant things...?" mumbled Michael quietly. He was hunched up on the far end of the sofa, and he tilted his head in thought.

"Diseases, she means," Lord Julius said, answering Michael's question. "Well, there are local diseases in Nevel. I'm sure that some people will also pick up diseases on their travels. You're thinking that it never hurts to be careful?"

"I hear that the south is particularly prone to the circulation of febrile diseases," I explained. "I've had discussions with Miss Irene about this too. I told her that we ought to increase our supply of fever cures and painkillers."

Lord Julius listened to me explain and then drifted into thought. After a brief pause, he began to speak. "Your mention of medicines has reminded me... Not long ago, I discovered something rather intriguing."

"You did?!"

He's got something in mind! My eyes lit up. Excited, I lurched forward on my chair.

But, after seeing my reaction, Lord Julius knitted his brows together apologetically. "Although, there are a few problems."

"Problems?" I asked.

"Yes. How about we relocate before I tell you?"

I tipped my head in puzzlement, and Lord Julius cast me a wry smile before standing up and starting to walk. "This way."

"Okay." Although I was confused, I settled on following after him. I got to my

feet and noticed a pleading look beside me, pointed in my direction.

“Umm... Do I stay here, or...?” Tears welled in Michael’s eyes. He was probably anxious at the thought of being left alone in this unfamiliar place.

“Come with us, of course,” I said, shooting him a smile.

And yes, I did almost forget about you again... Terribly sorry about that.

Lord Julius stopped in front of a room at the end of a long corridor. He knocked on the bulky door, and a boy’s voice told him to enter.

“Pardon me,” Lord Julius called before opening the door. I couldn’t see the interior of the room from behind his tall frame.

“Do you need something?” a voice asked.

“I do,” Lord Julius replied. “About that medicine we spoke of—”

“We’ve been over this. It may be effective, but we can’t afford to throw away money on a product when we don’t know how it’s made, where it’s sourced from, or even *what* exactly it is.”

The door might as well have slammed shut on Lord Julius.

His voice was clear and pleasant, but the rejection that the boy spat out was cold. “Fixating too much on curiosities that pique your interest is one of your bad habits. If you’re more interested in pursuing your hobbies than business, don’t involve me.”

“See, what did I tell you? Feisty, isn’t he?” Lord Julius muttered beneath a sigh before turning around to me. He slid a step to the left, which brought the person inside the room into my field of view.

The boy stood up from behind a desk that was buried beneath books and rolled-up diagrams. His soft, platinum-blond hair was long enough to reach his collarbone, and it was tied back with a navy blue ribbon, hiding all but the side of his face. The shade of his skin was pale white, almost transparent, and his eyes were an amethyst color—the same as his mother’s, framed by long eyelashes.

His delicate good looks still retained a strong resemblance to Emma, but he no longer looked like a girl, as he had all that time ago. He was now quite a bit taller, and most of all, his figure had become more masculine.

The attire he wore looked different to me as well. He was no longer clothed in an outfit with plenty of ribbons and lace to achieve a cute, androgynous look. Now, he was wearing a simple white blouse underneath a deep gray vest and gilet. His cravat, fastened with a cameo brooch, *was* made of lace, but it was a stylish accessory that gave a relaxed impression.

This handsome boy exuded an air of intelligence. He put down the quill he was holding, made from the flight feather of a white bird, and turned his face to me.

Our gazes met. After a momentary delay, his eyes grew wide.

Standing there in stricken silence, the boy stared at me so hard that I worried he'd bore a hole through me.



I faced him and gave a greeting. "It's been too long, George." This boy had matured to be the kind of young man who'd seize the heart of any girl. The George I remembered was a boy like springtime sunlight; he just had that gentle air about him. I recalled him smiling bashfully with those sweet good looks that were indistinguishable from Emma's.

But the boy in front of me right now gave off the complete opposite impression. I could sense that he was related to Emma because of his complexion and his facial structure, but everything else about him was different. His tone was levelheaded and his gaze was peaceful. His nature was more cool and dignified, like a winter morning, which seemed to resemble his father Morwitz rather than Emma.

"I think it's been four years since we last met face-to-face." I continued talking, growing slightly nervous because of his unapproachable atmosphere. "Since your ninth birthday, I believe."

It'd been so long that I had trouble knowing what to talk about. I'd have felt even more awkward staying quiet though. Even so, I couldn't wrestle a reply out of George. He just stood there, not speaking.

"You're much taller now. We used to be the same height."

Silence.

"Is your mother all right? I haven't been able to see her in the last six months. Has she fallen ill at all?"

Silence.

"She seemed healthy in the letters she's sent, but there's so much that you can't know without meeting up directly."

Silence.

I labored through the conversation, but couldn't even pry a "yes" or a "no" out of him. George's persistent silence drove me to panic. *Has he forgotten who I am?*

"George?" I asked.

"Mary...?" After a long silence, George finally opened his mouth. Looking

down at me, he'd called out with a dazed voice, as though he'd just woken from a dream.

Thank God, you do remember me, I whispered in my mind. I nodded with a smile. "Yes, it's me."

I heard a gasp. George's eyes shot wide open.

Mine did too, in an instinctive reaction to his. *What the hell's been going on these last few minutes?* Though confused and disoriented, I returned George's stare and tilted my head.

When I did, his graceful face burned scarlet in an instant.

I was dumbfounded by George, who'd blushed as red as ripened fruit all the way up to his ears. I couldn't keep up with what was happening.

Really, somebody tell me what the hell is going on.

"Ah, um...I'm—" George staggered one leg forward while emitting indiscernible noises.

"Ah, George—" His unsteady gait made me instinctively try to call for him to watch his step.

"Whoa?!"

Sure enough, his body swayed and he stumbled. He managed to avoid falling by immediately clasping onto the desk with a hand, but this action pushed the books that were piled up and sent them sliding off the surface of the desk.

What followed was an avalanche of books and documents, all of which let out a rustling noise as they fell to the floor. George's extended hand passed through the empty space left by the paperwork, and with excess momentum, his elbow knocked over a pot of ink.

"Argh! Aaargh!!!"

The now-empty pot tumbled to the floor with a hard clunk, but thankfully it didn't break, probably due to landing on the carpet. Unfortunately, the mahogany table was in a sorry state.

George tried to snatch up a document that was still undamaged. The diagram,

however, flew through the air like a particularly lively fish before falling onto the floor and rolling round and round.

That was some spectacle.

“Ah! Wai—” I shouted.

“Umm, be caref—” Michael called.

Krshhh. Fwoop. Boomph.

Nobody said a word.

Onomatopoeia alone might not be enough to explain exactly what just happened, but I hope that the better guessers out there can figure it out. Regardless, I'll explain what I just witnessed: First, George chased after the rolling drawings, though he was still unsteady on his feet. However, beneath him were the scattered books and documents. So, his foot slipped, he tumbled forward, and finally, he face-planted onto the ground. Thus ends my report.

The room descended into an all-too-awkward silence. I stood there, incapable of moving a muscle. *I have no idea what face I'm supposed to make in this situation.*

“Kill me now,” George grumbled quietly in a low tone of voice, still flat on the floor, face down.

Believe me, I understand why you feel that way, but choose life! And then stand back up like nothing happened as soon as you can, so I can feel better about just watching.

“Pfft.” After a long silence, a muffled voice could be heard.

I thought that Lord Julius had hit upon a way out of this awkward situation, so I turned my eyes to the side.

When I saw him, I gaped.

Of course I did! I mean, I'd put my faith in Lord Julius to fix the chilly atmosphere in this room. I was sure he'd devise some elegant, clever reaction plan that the likes of me could never dream up, to preserve both his nephew's dignity and my peace of mind.

But, to my dismay, the gentleman to my side was gripping his mouth and stomach and desperately trying to stifle his laughter.

“U-Uh, Lord Julius...”

“Pfft...hoo hoo.”

You can't be serious.

I'm over here, dripping cold sweat, trying to figure out the right reaction to give. And yet Lord Julius, the person I hoped I could use as an example, is clutching his stomach and guffawing at his nephew's mistake.

“Ah ha ha ha!!! N-No more! I can't keep it in!!!”

And now he started laughing out loud for real. The previously silent room was now resounding with his lively glee. He showed such little restraint that, in my disarray, I'd almost begun to lose my good sense and wonder whether laughing would actually dull the harsh edge for George.

What am I, crazy? There's no way that would be better. Laughing along would be the act of a monster, one who crushes the heart of a promising young man, throws it in a blender, and then grinds it to dust.

George's hand was quivering in embarrassment as he gripped the carpet. This alone was proof that Lord Julius's reaction was the wrong one.

“Do you really find your nephew's failing so comical?”

“N-No... I'm sorr... Bwa ha!” Lord Julius erupted into laughter again, unable to even finish his apology.

“Lord Julius!” I felt that this was becoming too unfair for George, so I tried for an admonishment. It had no effect.

“F-Forgive me. Please, pwa ha ha... *Ahem*, give me a mome— Mwa ha ha!”

With tears in the corners of his eyes, Lord Julius continued to laugh, and he suffered the occasional fit of coughing.

“Rotten old man,” George spat with disdain. The insult didn't seem appropriate to use against a handsome gentleman in his late twenties, but considering what George's mental state must've been like, I supposed that his

words couldn't be helped.

From the bottom of my heart, I felt sorry for George, who was still collapsed on the floor.

At some point while I was stumped about what to do, Michael had knelt down beside George. As I watched him, I saw a warm look in his eyes, and he tenderly offered George a handkerchief.

"Use this," Michael said.

"Right. Thank you." George sat up, took the handkerchief, and pressed it against his slightly inflamed forehead.

George was looking down, sporting an abashed expression, and Michael was gazing at him with affection. From the way that Michael had nodded his head, as if to say, *I get it, I know the feeling*, I surmised that he'd found a kindred spirit in George.

"How long are you going to keep laughing?" George finally stood up, brushing off the dust from his clothes, and shot an ice-cold glare at his uncle, who still had his arms wrapped around his belly.

When exposed to that sharp, piercing glower, Lord Julius stopped laughing and raised his hands in surrender. "Sorry," he said. "Don't be so mad."

"Some nerve you have! Asking that after all your laughing."

"What can I say? I never would've imagined that my nephew, the boy well-known to be smart and skilled, would tri—ha ha—trip up at the *exact* moment he wanted to shine." Lord Julius whipped his head down and stopped talking, probably because another wave of laughter was bubbling through him.

"Oh, so you want me to kill you," George declared emotionlessly. "I understand. I'll send for the most skilled assassin I can find."

I probably wasn't mistaken in noticing the vein throbbing on George's forehead.

"Sorry," Lord Julius apologized again. "I am. I won't laugh anymore."

"I know how undignified I looked," George said sourly. "I don't need you to tell me. And I also understand that I displayed an irrevocably egregious blunder

when it mattered most. You're right, I'm a worthless sod who missed his golden opportunity. I'm a louse. I'm scum, a failure as a person. But so what, for crying out loud."

"I truly am sorry." Lord Julius bowed his head deeply in response to his nephew's ravings.

George, however, continued the steady stream of self-directed insults with a straight face. While he was grumbling, almost chanting to himself, someone patted him gently on the shoulder.

"You're...?" George started.

"It's all right," Michael said. "Things often go wrong exactly when you want to show off."

George opened his eyes wide, and Michael gave him a thumbs-up.

"Besides," Michael continued, "the princess *is* cute, so as a man, I think it's only natural to get nervous."

"Thank you," George said.

The boys smiled at each other. Lord Julius watched on with a forced grin. And me... Well, I'd been cut out of the picture for the last ten minutes or so.

Pay more attention to me. Somebody. Anybody!

"We really do apologize," said George and Lord Julius in unison.

"Please, don't worry about it." I forced out a strained smile at the two Eigers while they bowed their heads to me.

After George's fall, he'd asked the belated question to Michael: "Who *are* you, by the way?" The two of them had finally been able to give their self-introductions. In the end, it took a little under twenty minutes from the point of entering the room before somebody finally remembered I was there. They'd all scrambled to apologize after they'd noticed that I'd been standing, still and alone, by the threshold.

I wasn't exactly mad, although I *did* feel jealous about how quickly the boys

had befriended one other. But more important than that was the medicine Lord Julius had mentioned. I wasted no time in raising that subject, and George told me the story without any airs or graces.

This is what he said: A merchant, employed by Lord Julius, acquired the medicine by chance. During the merchant's stay in one of Nevel's port towns, a sailor sharing an inn with him came down with a high fever. The sickness didn't interest the merchant since these things happened often. Long voyages at sea could drain a person's stamina, and no small number of seafarers would fall ill because of it.

The season is now winter, so the disease is likely just a cold. A few days and he'll be back on his feet, the merchant thought. Turns out, his prediction was half-right and half-wrong. The fever *had* gone away on its own the next day, and the sailor seemed to have recovered...until two days after that when his high fever returned.

The cures that the doctors gave him had scarcely any effect, and the sailor's condition visibly deteriorated every day. Taking this into consideration, they finally realized that this illness was no ordinary cold. However, the doctors had never seen these symptoms before and were clueless about how to treat them.

Just as a pessimistic mood began to hang in the air, deliverance arrived from somewhere unexpected. Some foreign sailors arrived at the port by chance to escape a storm, and they heard the tale of the sick sailor. They'd brought along a certain type of medicine and they entrusted seven days' worth of it to the doctor, plus some to spare. They relayed instructions for its use and then set sail as soon as the storm had broken.

The doctors and the sailor's companions followed the foreigners' guidance and nursed their companion desperately. As a result of this treatment, the fever vanished completely, and the sick sailor made a full recovery from his disease.

Certain of the medicine's wondrous quality, Lord Julius's employee bought the remaining spare doses of the medicine from the doctors.

But at this point, there was a problem. As George had said earlier, the medicine's composition, as well as its method and place of manufacture, were all unknown. While they had a specimen of the actual medicine in their

possession, they didn't have technology like the kind in modern-day Japan that could perform a substance component analysis.

The only clue to the medicine's origins was the ship it had sailed on; it might've been possible to discern which country owned that vessel by scouring the records of port admissions, but tracking down the individual sailors would be almost infeasible. Even supposing that they could be found, it'd take still more time to contact them. Moreover, the doctors reported that those sailors had acquired the medicine from someone else.

The phrase "an obstacle at every turn" perfectly described this situation.

"Well, it certainly is an intriguing product..." George said. "But we have too little information about it. We can't waste effort and ridiculous sums of money on something that might not end up being profitable merchandise."

"And there you have it," Lord Julius said. "That's exactly how he's been turning me down."

George had again shot down the idea as not worth his time, and Lord Julius forced out a smile.

"I have great faith in your judgment," George explained. "But I don't think that the product is worth our involvement right now. There are too many unpredictable elements—it would be unwise to handle it during our business's expansion."

George had a point. It'd be too risky to invest money in something with so few leads, and especially a product that might not be fit for sale. That is, in the hypothetical case that they were able to find it at all.

While I understood the logic, I couldn't give up on my goal. Something deep in my heart stirred. If someone were to accuse me of thinking like a gamer, I'd have no comeback for them, but I couldn't rid myself of the feeling that, somehow, I was standing at a key divergence point.

"Could I hold it?" I asked.

"Go ahead," Lord Julius replied.

Having received permission, I reached my hand out to the medicine packet

placed on the table. The dark pill didn't surrender its composition to me, no matter how closely I examined it. I wafted the air with my hand to try and get a sniff, but the medicine's scent was faint. Compared to traditional Chinese medicine, it had almost no odor. I did smell a slight hint of earth and plants, but I learned nothing more than that.

Since I handled medicinal herbs regularly, I thought that, just maybe, I'd be able to ascertain the ingredients, but my hopes were short-lived. *I don't have even a first guess.*

Upon realizing my low specs, I lost a bit of heart. I'd studied subjects widely, and considered myself to have a good range of skills that I could perform quite capably, but I was just a jack-of-all-trades, master of none.

A sigh almost escaped my lips unbidden.

I felt a pair of eyes on me, and when I turned to look back at them, I found Michael gazing at the medicine for some reason, brimming with interest.

"Do you want to take a look?" I asked without thinking, and he nodded his head up and down. After I'd handed him the medicine, I turned away from Michael and faced George.

"Lord Julius, George."

"Yes?" replied George.

"What's the matter?" Lord Julius followed.

Looking at them both, I wanted to speak, but I hesitated. I'd almost started by saying "if," but I stopped myself. *This is business. I'm not asking friends for a favor. Hypotheticals will ruin my meaning.*

I blinked once, took a deep breath, and opened my mouth again. "Will you allow me to buy this medicine?"

George's eyes widened slightly, but Lord Julius's expression didn't change.

"We have sorcerers and doctors at the palace," I continued. "Their wealth of knowledge far surpasses my own, so I'd like to have them examine a specimen, and then hear their advice. Of course, I'll investigate the port admission records as well."

“You’re telling us that *you’ll* investigate the records?” George asked.

“I am.”

I had almost asked “If I uncover any leads in my own investigation, could I get you to renew negotiations for the drug?” But a deal with so many uncertainties could hardly be called a deal at all. It’d just be my selfish request.

“Could I ask your reason?” George asked. His almost-translucent amethyst eyes stared fixedly at me.

“Nevel will soon secure diplomatic relations with a multitude of countries,” I replied. “Our ports, in particular, will receive ships from far-off countries. We must act *before* someone contracts the same disease as that sailor. Moreover, depending on the situation, it’s possible that the disease could spread.”

According to George, the sailor had caught the disease in wintertime. I didn’t know how the infection had spread, but if it were vector-borne, then it could’ve failed to circulate to other humans because the insects or animals that carried it were in hibernation. Although, I couldn’t completely discount the possibility that we’d just gotten lucky.

“There’s a disease that Nevel’s medicine can’t remedy. There’s also a chance that my efforts could make the difference and allow us to find a cure,” I said. “That’s the only reason I have.”

“Mary...” George said.

“I hope you don’t misinterpret me—I’m not criticizing the two of you. I’m not so foolish that I would suggest that those with power and money should throw away everything in the pursuit of saving lives. Philanthropy’s one thing, and business is another. Each comes with its own principles to uphold, so there’s no need to be ashamed of your previous decision.”

I couldn’t prevent a pandemic with just my knowledge and abilities. A little girl like me had basically no tricks up her sleeves, especially in this world with none of the right facilities. How could I solve a problem that the wonders of even modern medicine would have difficulty with?

But Rosemary the *princess* was different. I might’ve not had the medical know-how, but I had the influence.

“I’m a princess,” I declared. “I want to do everything in my power to protect my people and their livelihoods.”

The following silence lasted a few seconds. George breathed out a long sigh and glanced at Lord Julius by his side.

“Understood.” In contrast to George, Lord Julius nodded with a smile. For some reason, he had an animated look in his eyes. “We have three spare samples of the medicine. You can take one of those.”

My eyes lit up.

“Please allow us to keep the remaining two,” Lord Julius continued. “We’ll commence our own study, so genuine samples will be necessary.”

“Th—Huh?” *Thank you*, I’d opened my mouth to say, but I froze partway through. I was dumbfounded, unable to keep up with the sudden development.

What did he just say?

“Could we leave the port admission records to you?” Lord Julius asked. “Your investigation will most likely get results more quickly; we’d have to submit an application and wait around for its approval. Once you discover the ship and the country of origin, we’ll take over on our end.”

“Right...”

“I know a few doctors,” Lord Julius continued, “but I’ve never made the acquaintance of a sorcerer, so would you mind informing me of what your palace’s sorcerers have to say? One who uses magic with an earth affinity would be most desirable, if at all possible. However, I don’t believe there are any like that currently employed at your palace, is that correct?”

“Y-Yes,” I replied. “We don’t have any earth-affinity sorcerers.”

“Very well,” Lord Julius continued. “I’ll look for a sorcerer in the countryside myself. Even if their magical reserves aren’t large, their plant life expertise will surpass sorcerers of other affinities.”

The conversation bounded on while I was acting confused.

For some reason, it sounds like the two Eigels will be starting their own investigation into the medicine. Why is that? Was I not listening properly? Did I

doze off with my eyes open? No, surely not.

“If there’s any development, a speedy report—”

“Um, excuse me!” I interrupted Lord Julius with vigor.

“Yes?”

“You two are going to help me?” I asked hesitantly. Though I’d posed the question, I steeled myself for the eventual embarrassment of realizing that I’d misunderstood.

Surprisingly, my query was answered at once. “We are,” Lord Julius said simply.

I stood in wide-eyed astonishment. When I spoke, my voice came out sounding bewildered.

“Why?”

They’re offering assistance and helping me with my task, so I should accept that at face value and be happy. I tried to tell myself this, but I just couldn’t erase my confusion.

Lord Julius saw my probably pathetic face and smiled wryly. I couldn’t tell whether he was unsure of how to react, or if he was just having fun watching me. I couldn’t feel any hostility radiating from him though. His narrowed eyes were gentle through and through.

“The reason is simple,” Lord Julius explained. “We—no, the whole Eigel family owes you a debt.”

“A debt?” I asked.

“If you hadn’t visited our home, Emma would still be bedridden.”

“That...wasn’t only my doing,” I responded. “In fact, I had only a minuscule influence. Her recovery was the result of her—and her family’s—hard work.”

I’d shrunk back at the word “debt.” *That’s an exaggeration. I doubt that I could’ve made any difference on my own.*

That was what I thought, but Lord Julius shook his head. Then he gazed into the distance, as though reflecting on the past.

“No. Only you... Only Princess Rosemary could’ve achieved that.”

Upon being called by my formal title, I felt my eyes widen a little.

“Morwitz loved Emma too strongly to be firm with her,” Lord Julius said. “He’d tell her that locking herself indoors was unhealthy, but she’d refuse to leave. She’d complain that it was too cold outside, and he’d relent; I’d bring food and medicines rich in vitamins, but if she said ‘no,’ then Morwitz would give up on getting her to take them. Well, they certainly weren’t the most pleasant-tasting things, so her distaste was understandable.” Lord Julius grinned sardonically.

Ah, I get it. As I listened to him speak, it began to make sense to me.

Other than my vegetable recipes, the health plan I’d concocted wasn’t exactly novel. They’d reached the same conclusion, but the execution of the plan had been far beyond their abilities. They’d needed an outside party to intervene—someone who was too important for Morwitz to turn away, while at the same time being a person whom the child-fond Emma would take a liking to. I’d been the perfect person for that job.

I listened intently as Lord Julius continued. “I’d become half-resigned to her sickly fate, and only had a lingering hope that someone would come along and change the state of affairs. When you expressed your intention to remedy her health, for the first time in my life, I thanked God for giving us a miracle.”

“I think ‘miracle’ is going too far...” I said, trailing off.

“It’s not. The fact that you, a child younger than my nephew, could be so wise is itself a miracle. And you didn’t simply bring a proposal—you went above and beyond. You fit us into your busy schedule and visited our home, worried with us, and shared your joy with us. Do you realize how rare that is?”

Lord Julius spoke passionately. In an uncharacteristic display of animation, excitement thrummed in his voice, and even his cheeks were slightly flushed. His eyes lit up with all the dazzle of a young boy’s vigor. After noticing that I’d lurched backward slightly, overwhelmed, he cleared his throat and said, “Please excuse me.”

George had listened to his uncle speak in silence but then pointed a wry smile

at him.

“Thanks entirely to you improving my mother’s health,” George said, “my father and uncle can focus on their work, and I am afforded the chance to study a wide variety of subjects. We were all at a fearful standstill, terrified that my mother might not last another day, but it was unmistakably you who showed us a future and the way forward.”

He wore a gentle expression. There was nothing twisted or insane behind it like there had been in *Hidden World*. His smile was soft, warm, and so kind that I felt the urge to join in. Seeing him like that, it finally dawned on me.

I have changed the future. Here’s one tragedy that I managed to prevent.

“Princess Rosemary,” Lord Julius said, “for saving our dear family, allow us to once again voice our gratitude and respect.”

“This time, let us help you,” George added.

Facing me, George and Lord Julius both bowed their heads deeply.

It took some thinking, but in the end, I decided to take the Eigers up on their kind offer. Though I was hesitant, I knew that, at the moment, securing a guaranteed method of acquiring the medicine took priority over my insignificant worries.

This isn’t the time to be second-guessing myself, I thought, and I made up my mind.

Having enlisted the assistance of the two men, I left the Eigers’ mansion. My heart was now set on having a serious discussion with Michael, once and for all, as we returned home in the carriage. To do that, I’d need Michael to listen.

However, his head was currently in the clouds.

He’d answer me when I spoke to him, but his mind was elsewhere. He was looking down in silence, seemingly deep in thought about something, and he was gently petting the black cat on his lap in an absentminded way. Occasionally, he’d rub the cat’s fur in the wrong direction, and each time, the black cat would shake its tail in annoyance.

This cat, which Michael had saved before our visit to the Eigels, had apparently been stuck in the middle of the road due to a nasty bite on its leg from a wild animal. We'd decided for the time being to bring the cat with us on our journey home, though we made sure to give it some temporary first aid. For a wild cat, it was rather well-behaved; it wouldn't bite, even if we misjudged where to stroke it and accidentally touched its tail. It'd meow an objection, but nothing more.

"Michael?" I called.

"Huh... Ah! Y-Yes?" he responded, his head bouncing up.

"The cat's telling you to be more careful when you pet it," I informed him.

"Oh... Sorry." He looked at me, then the cat, and then apologized, looking embarrassed. "Sorry to you too," he whispered softly. He stroked the cat gently, and it narrowed its eyes and let out a single purr, as if to say, "I forgive you."

"Is there something on your mind?" I asked. "You could talk to me about it, if you'd like." When I saw Michael's sullen expression, those words slipped from my mouth.

"Princess..."

I only had a short span of time to talk with Michael before we reached the Great Temple, so I couldn't afford to chat about unrelated things. If I didn't persuade Michael now, there was a chance that, in the not-too-distant future, he'd leave on a journey to travel the country. From there, he might perish in a temple that he'd visit along the way, making room for the demon lord to take over his corpse.

I knew all of that, but I couldn't shrug off what Michael was worried about as unimportant. I didn't want to write off his concerns as insignificant compared to the demon lord's revival. After all, I knew nothing about him—nothing about the life of Michael von Diebolt, a story which had gone more or less untold, even at the end of *Hidden World*.

Silence befell the carriage, and only the clattering sound of the wheels spinning over the cobblestone road could be heard. Michael's lips flitted apart, then he hesitated and shut his mouth. I watched on, not rushing him, and he

opened his lips again after a short while.

“How can you be so strong, Princess?”

My eyes grew wide at what he'd said. *How can I be so strong...? Who said I was strong in the first place?*

Putting aside whether that was an appropriate compliment to give a lady, I didn't find it unpleasant. But it did strike me as odd because I'd never once thought of myself that way.

“Do you think I'm strong?” I asked, and Michael nodded. The gesture looked fit for an innocent kid, which inspired my protective instincts and caused me to put on the airs of someone interacting with a young child. “Can I ask why you think that?”

He nodded again with an uneasy look in his eyes. “You said earlier that having power and money didn't give you a duty to help people, and that everyone had their own principles to uphold, so there was nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I did,” I said, urging the conversation on.

“You don't compel other people to do anything,” he continued at length. “You don't say, ‘You have this, so give to the have-nots,’ or ‘You're mighty, so protect the weak.’ But you try to fulfill your own duty as a princess without a second thought.”

His loquaciousness was enough to instill doubt about whether he'd only pretended to be a silent, nervous wreck a few hours before.

I'll bet he can hold a normal conversation as long as he doesn't think about it too much. His concentration is preoccupied with other concerns right now, so he's not anxious about speaking.

He usually looked at the ground, but now his head was raised. As he gazed at me, I saw myself reflected in his eyes, which harbored a look of agonized desperation.

“How can you accept all of that responsibility, like it's just obvious?” he asked. “It's not as if you asked to be born a princess. Don't you ever think about running away, or washing your hands of it all?”

“Oh,” I responded, “I do.”

“How do you never doubt yourself— Uh, huh?”

Michael had been churning out words at rapid speed like he hadn’t actually wanted an answer, but once he’d comprehended my reply, he stopped himself.

I meant no offense to him, but I found his dumbfounded expression somewhat funny, and I restated myself while chuckling. “Sometimes I *do* want to be rid of it. Of course I do.”

“Huh, uh...that’s...natural, is it?”

“Yes.”

He blinked his monolid almond eyes over and over. Michael must have found that answer quite surprising. I saw his honest gaze conveying undisguised confusion, and I broadened my smile.

“I’m only human, so I’m imperfect. I’m well aware of how privileged I am, but there will still be days when I feel suffocated by my current lifestyle. Sometimes I want to say, ‘To hell with my studies and lessons,’ and then go somewhere sunny to spend the whole day reading books. Other times I want to rip off the uncomfortable dresses, slip on a cotton smock, and run through the meadows barefoot.”

“You do...?” Michael mumbled, astonished.

“The reason why I don’t put those thoughts into action isn’t because I’m a perfect princess. It’s just what’s necessary to achieve the future I want to see, so I face it all head on, without running away.”

Freedom always came with a significant price. Each person had to choose for themselves whether to value the worldly pleasures at their fingertips, or a stable future. *The Ant and the Grasshopper* and the other old teachings tended to preach that people ought to live modest lives, but I was certain that there wasn’t a right answer to be found.

“If you’re thinking of running away from something,” I said, looking Michael straight in the eyes as I spoke, “then I want you to imagine: What will you gain in the place you run to? What would you lose by fleeing? And which option will

you select? It's *your* choice."

Michael nodded, and then fell silent. He kept thinking for the remainder of our journey until the carriage reached the Great Temple. When we parted, he stared at me intently, as though he had something he wanted to say. However, his only remarks were the conventional farewells.

In the end, I didn't manage to get any persuading done. But I couldn't bring myself to say, "Do this, don't do that," to a kid who was worrying so much.

"I wonder if I handled that right..." I muttered to myself.

"I think you did," Sir Leonhart said. Until this point, he'd been silently keeping a constant eye on our surroundings. "He looks timid, but I expect you'll discover that he's actually quite willful. He most likely wouldn't have agreed if you'd tried to stop him without a well thought-out reason."

I nodded at Sir Leonhart's words to express my agreement.

He was inspired enough to charge out of the Great Temple to help people, even in Hidden World. He has the looks of someone that people could walk all over, but on the inside, he's resolute.

"Moreover," Sir Leonhart continued, "it might just be the case that the problem he's worried about is related to ours in some way. There's probably no lie in his desire to help others, but there *is* uncertainty. He shouldn't leave the temple before he's decided what exactly he wishes to do."

"I hope so..." My reply was vague, a reflection of my restless feelings. The cat was nestled in my lap, and I ran the tips of my fingers across its black fur. I'd assumed the role of bringing the cat home in place of Michael since he lived in a temple. The cat purred with pleasure.

"It's all right," Sir Leonhart said quietly.

My head flew up on its own, and my gaze met his. His eyes were calm, and he gave me a kind smile, as though to wash away my anxiety.

"Men are far simpler and more keen to show off than you think," he explained. "He wouldn't do anything irresponsible, like wander off without even a clear idea of where he's headed. Not when he's seen you—a sweet girl,

younger than himself—show firm conviction in making progress toward a definite goal.”

“Sir Leonhart...”

“So, it’s all right,” he repeated. “You haven’t made a mistake.”

With his reassurance, my muscles unclenched. He’d seen right through my fears. While watching me breathe out a little sigh, he narrowed his eyes further.

He really does understand how to deal with me. It did feel like I was dancing to his tune, but I’d stopped caring about that. Hearing him tell me that it was all right, it finally sank in that I wasn’t on my own anymore. Until now, I’d never been able to go to anyone for advice, so I could only press forward despite my anxieties. *It’s okay, I’m doing the right thing,* I’d repeat over and over, but that was only ever just me talking to myself.

I never knew that those same words could offer such relief when they were spoken by someone else... No, spoken by Sir Leonhart.

“Thank you,” I whispered while savoring the euphoric sensation of a fire being lit deep inside my soul.

“You’re welcome,” Sir Leonhart responded, and his voice sounded so gentle.

The Reincarnated Princess Reads

“You took less time than I’d anticipated.”

I was in the king’s bedroom and the time was a little after nightfall. I’d come in mentally prepared to be shouted at for disturbing his work, but he’d defied my expectations and spoken dispassionately with his usual expressionless look. Since I’d expected him to ridicule me for taking so long, I had no idea how to respond to being told that I’d, in fact, taken less time than he’d expected.

“Is that so?” I figured that this was a sign of how little hope he had in me, but I only let out an exhausted murmur. I didn’t have the energy to bite back. “I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“I wasn’t.”

“*That so?*” I muttered with much more contempt this time. My mental fortitude was nearing rock bottom. *I wanna leave. I just wanna turn around and leave so badly.*

Paying no mind to the view of my eyes glossing over completely, my father began to shuffle his feet along the floor with a candlestick in his hands. Along the elegant Renaissance-style wall, which was adorned with intricate patterns in white and gold, there was a door that did not match the decor and looked rather out of place. He pulled an antique key from his breast pocket and inserted it into the door’s lock, then shot a single look back at me. He said nothing, but I thought that I could sense his eyes saying, “Come, and be quick.”

I stifled the urge to retreat and followed after him.

The candlelight faintly illuminated a room that featured no ornamentation at all, in stark contrast to the luxurious and gorgeous bedchamber we’d come from. This room occupied an area one quarter the size of the bedroom, and the large bookcases covering every inch of the walls added to the confined feeling. There were no windows, but the air wasn’t stagnant. The only pieces of furniture, besides the bookcases, were a table and a chaise longue.

My father pulled a book from a shelf without hesitation, and then practically shoved it toward me. Without sparing a look at my confusion, he placed the candlestick on the low table and reclined on the chaise longue next to it. He then dragged a bottle of wine toward himself and crudely poured it into a glass. After gulping the wine down like it was water, he fished out the bookmark dividing pages in his own thick book and resumed reading.

I stood frozen in place, astonished, and watched my father acting so casually.

Who is this? I couldn't help but mutter in my mind. The man before my eyes, Randolph von Velfalt, was my real father, but we had never interacted at all in private. Therefore, his personal life had always been a mystery to me, but I'd imagined that he continued working on his days off.

My father would never spend his rest days lounging about, that's just not him, I'd thought. I even had trouble picturing him eating or sleeping or anything else that humans had to do at a bare minimum to survive. And yet, when I was shown a firsthand look at my father in his alone time, he was relaxing as leisurely as could be.

He was sunk into the high-quality leather chaise longue and absorbed in reading while drinking his second glass of wine. His sprawled posture was most definitely not what I'd have called well-mannered. I felt like I could see a faint smile on his cheeks where they were illuminated by the candlelight, and the current visage of my father seemed somewhat more human than usual.

"Are you not going to read?" he asked.

"I am," I answered reflexively.

"Sit then, rather than stand there all day."

I went quiet.

Yeah, but where though?

Holding the book, I glanced around the inside of the room in silence. As I described earlier, the only furniture pieces were a table and a chaise longue. The punch line to this joke wasn't that I didn't know how to count—there *was* only one place to sit. It was all very well, him telling me to sit, but there was nowhere *to* sit.

“Come.” He called out to me as I was staring at the floor and its dark-colored carpet, thinking, *He doesn’t mean on the floor, does he?*

When I lifted my head, I saw my father beckoning me. He patted the chaise he was lying on, telling me to sit there.

“Uuh...”

The chaise longue was indeed large, so there was enough room for me to sit down upon it. Logically, I understood what he was saying. However, my mind was calling out... *No.*

Just what sin had I committed to deserve having to read while cuddled up with my father?

“I won’t permit you to remove the book from this room. If you want to read it, then do so here.”

“Yes, father.”

Shouldn’t I just bring my own chair? I contemplated, but in the end, I ignored my dissatisfaction and submitted. *The last thing I want is to peeve him and get kicked out.*

“Pardon me,” I said as I seated myself in the free space alongside my father’s torso.

I’ve come this far, so I’ll show him! I’ve just gotta think of him as a slightly avant-garde backrest.

I placed the book on my lap. Its antique age showed in the discoloration of the paper and the worn-away letters on the cover. My heart thumped with the nerves and excitement of holding such a precious book in my hands, so I took a deep breath to slow my pulse. I finally opened the book, after brushing my fingers across the dulled indigo-blue cover.

Then, I turned over the inside cover and froze in wordless terror while staring at the first page. My reaction wasn’t caused by the book’s contents—it was something more basic than that.

I’d stumbled at the first hurdle, so shock and disappointment welled up in my heart. Really, I ought to have considered this possibility first and foremost. But I

hadn't, and that was because I was an idiot. *Why hadn't I found a solution to this before coming to my father's room?*

However, it was too late to regret my own thoughtlessness. In order to break the deadlock, the only plan I could think of was to leave and return more prepared. But would I be afforded a second chance? I pressed down hard with my trembling fingertips.

Oh, how could I be so stupid? What an idiot I am. A complete idiot.

Why did I... Why did I think I'd be able to read it?!

I was crushed with disappointment. The book on my lap was written in the distant past, so naturally, the letters were composed of shapes that were utterly different from their current forms. To put it simply, reading these characters was beyond my abilities.

Why hadn't I considered something so obvious?

"You can't read it?" my father called out to me all of a sudden.

I flinched, and a dry hiccup escaped my throat. I slowly glanced over to where he'd been lying with his face turned down, and saw that he'd stopped reading and was now watching me. A cold sweat ran down my spine.

"I ca—" In my anxiety, my voice squeaked.

What now—what do I do? Should I be honest? Should I bluff? I didn't know which option was correct. But my answer could potentially rob me of any chance to read these books. Cogs whirled fruitlessly in my brain; I knew far too little about my father to conjure up a course of action and proper countermeasure.

What should I do? Come on!

The result of my introspection about what step to take next was—

"I can't... But I will!"

—an answer as silly as that.

I'm going to play the role of my own critic: Rose, what the hell was that? "I can't, but I will." What does that even mean? Where there's a will, there's a

way? Is plucky determination gonna see me through?

“Right,” he said.

Huh? No comeback?

I hadn’t expected him to flat-out ignore me, so I fell into disarray. I scrutinized his face, but it was, as always, expressionless. No smile, no anger. He might’ve been exasperated, but I couldn’t tell just by looking.

My father sat upright and peered over my shoulders at the book in my hands. “Can you read modern books on history?” he asked.

“I can.”

I could read most of the historical texts in the palace’s libraries. I’d received seven years of education, starting when I was five years old, so I was quite confident in my abilities.

“Then there should be parts that you can read... Look at this section.” My father reached his hand out and traced his finger across some words in the book. “This reads, ‘the Kingdom of Nevel.’”

D-Does it? I can’t read it...

To be honest, they look more like symbols than letters to me.

“The complex characters here underwent several stages of simplification to achieve their present form,” he explained. “Although of course, there are many place names and turns of phrase in these pages that have fallen out of use these days.”

I took another look after he spoke, and indeed, I could vaguely see that...kind of. Replacing the complex figures, which seemed to represent ivy and bird wings and such, with dots and curves left a script that did seem to resemble modern letters.

Like the Latin alphabet, Nevel’s official writing system was composed of twenty-six letters. *So do I just have to count these pictographs, simplify them, and match them up with modern letters?*

“Father, could I borrow some paper?” Having found the first step toward a solution, my motivation suddenly sprung forth, and I turned around to my

father enthusiastically.

“Yes. Use it as you will,” he said, giving me permission. So, I collected a pen and a piece of paper from the neighboring room and began to jot down the characters with gusto. My father behind me resumed his reading, but I wasn’t bothered by him anymore.

While running my fingers over the groups of symbols written in the book, I isolated the characters. Thanks to my deep concentration, I finished the task sooner than I’d expected. After a satisfied nod, I reexamined the book, counting the symbols to ensure that I’d left none out.

“Huh?” I stopped my hand and tilted my head. I double-checked and triple-checked, and still—there were thirty symbols. *Why’re there four extra?*

“There are four extraneous symbols, aren’t there?” My father’s voice called out with such perfect timing that I thought he’d read my mind.

I was too surprised to speak.

I have a hunch that, in these last few minutes, this man’s been intent on shortening my life span, I thought, suppressing the rapid beating of my heart. When I turned around though, my father wasn’t even looking my way. His gaze was still fixed on the book in his hands.

“Remove the extra ones,” he instructed. “Those four are always used in a single group, so you must be able to understand which ones I mean.”

“Uuuh... Yes, father.”

He’d rather rudely implied my ignorance with his tone, but his words turned out to be appropriate advice. I hurriedly skimmed through the book, and sure enough, those four characters showed themselves. These particular shapes were always used in a four-piece set and were never employed in any other combinations. I removed them and matched the remaining twenty-six letters to their modern counterparts. After I did, the peculiarity of those four characters stood out all the more.

The other letters appeared to be depictions of creatures and nature, but those four alone were different; I couldn’t even imagine what real-world objects they were based on. And yet, as I stared at them, I found myself feeling

inexplicably discomforted.

What are they?

“They represent the demon lord,” my father said as if he’d plucked a question from my mind for a second time. “The people of old must have disdained using their existing letters to describe their greatest threat and taboo—the demon lord. So, they’d created four new characters, and forbade their use for any word other than the one meaning the demon lord. I don’t know how they’re read. Some say that they have no pronunciation, or that it’s the name that the demon lord possessed when he was still a person. However, the truth is unknown.”

“The demon lord used to be a person?!” I blurted out, my interest piqued, but he gave me a coolheaded reply.

“I just told you that the truth is unknown, did I not?”

So that’s nothing more than one of many theories, it sounds like.

“Never mind that, hurry up and get reading,” my father said, yawning. “I’ll be going to sleep as soon as you’re done.”

I felt like I’d witnessed a truly rare spectacle, and not for the first time that night.

I had to read every bit that I could before I got chucked out. My father resumed his reading, so I decided to follow his example and concentrate on the book.

I spent a little under two hours in a prolonged staring contest with the book. My brows were furrowed and I twisted my head around while stretching to ease the tension in my shoulders. I had a headache from the overuse of my eyes and my mind.

“Have you begun to get the idea?”

While I was massaging my forehead with my fingers, my backrest—or rather, my father—called out to me. *He’s kept his mouth shut this whole time, so I forgot he was even there. Look at me, I’m so adaptable.*

“I have,” I answered, “but ‘begun’ really is the key word.”

“Tell me, then,” he said. He wasn’t pointing his gaze at me, let alone turning to face me.

While pondering what I’d read, I started to speak. “It’s my understanding that we owe our current peaceful and enjoyable lifestyles to the efforts of our forebears.” I stated this softly, but he mercilessly cut me down.

“I didn’t ask for your *opinion*.”

“*That so?*” His response annoyed me, but I didn’t object. Even I’d thought that my answer sounded like a grade-schooler giving a report.

Nonetheless, I continued my explanation. “I realized that the demon lord’s power could potentially be influenced by his avatar.”

According to the book, our ancestors had searched for a method to seal away the demon lord after deciding that it would’ve been impossible to destroy him. They’d been successful in sealing him away, at a great cost of human lives. However, the barrier hadn’t been perfect, and so the demon lord had been able to revive multiple times.

Over the course of many repeated, fierce battles, humanity had become able to cast more and more effective seals to prevent the demon lord’s resurrection...but it must’ve been a hellish struggle up until that point; the shortest period of respite had been only five years, and then the demon lord had returned. Though, as a result, it became evident that he hadn’t possessed the same amount of power each time he’d revived.

“It’s written that, during the nightmarish era when half of the continent was reduced to ash, the demon lord had a famed sorcerer as his avatar,” I explained. “Research was conducted regarding the individuals that the demon lord possessed, starting from his most recent appearance, and then the one before that, and so on. This fueled speculation that the demon lord had the ability to amplify his avatar’s inherent magical power.”

“That’s right.” My father closed the book in his hands and turned his eyes to me. “We need magic to resist the demon lord,” he said, “but it’s dangerous to allow humans with powerful magic near him. It’s a risky bet.”

I nodded, my face meek.

The demon lord's avatars must've cursed at their fates, at having their lifeless bodies used to threaten their loved ones and their homelands. Though they'd possessed the magical aptitude to resist the demon lord, it was that very power that had been used to drive the world to the brink of destruction.

"Hmm?" When my thoughts reached that point, something niggled at my mind. *I'm not sure why, but...I get the feeling that I'm forgetting something important.*

"Right, then," my father said.

"Hwaa?!" Just as I'd been absorbed in some serious thinking, I felt a sudden onslaught of breathlessness and weightlessness. I let out a muffled scream.

"As I declared earlier, I will be sleeping now."

"Th-That doesn't mean you can grab me by the collar!" I protested.

He left the small library with a candle in one hand and my collar in the other. The moment we entered his bedroom, he plonked me onto the floor.

What a bastard... Father, I'm not keen on the idea of you picking up your little daughter like a kitten, especially while she's in the middle of thinking about something serious. At least hesitate for a second before you do that.

I shot him a spiteful glare, but he paid it no mind. After locking the door to the book room, my father headed to his bed and waved his hand, as though shooing away a cat or a dog.

"Thank you for making time for me. I'll be on my way." He'd irritated me, but losing my temper here would be far too childish. I bowed my head and made my exit.

But don't think this is over—I'll get my revenge! I will, and sometime soon. Mark my words, I'll charge in, however many times it takes to read every book in that room. Don't you forget this, father!

My personal guard greeted me as I left the king's bedroom. He looked like the perfect knight, standing up straight and wearing an imposing facial expression. I was aware that I'd kept him waiting for a long time, but he showed no hint at all

of dropping his guard. The sight of him maintaining vigilance toward his surroundings reminded me of his prowess.

But the very next second, his firm expression gave way to bliss.

“Lady Rosemary,” he called.

I gasped.

His gently narrowed green eyes harbored a fierce glow, and this expression spoke volumes about his current delight. With his faint lips arched into a smile, his handsome, masculine features took on a sweet look.

I recoiled at the readily apparent display of joy from Klaus. *What’s the deal with this faithful dog of mine?* For a moment, I wondered how best to react, but in the end, I coldly began to walk away, showing no facial reaction.

“I’m going back to my room,” I stated.

“Understood!”

All I did was speak to you, so what’s got you so chirpy?

An illusionary tail wagged behind him with tremendous enthusiasm. I was reminded of Taro, the dog my past-life grandma had owned; Klaus’s current exuberance was so similar, recalling Taro’s reaction to seeing his leash prepped for a walk. But unlike Taro, I didn’t find Klaus cute. Not one bit.

With my overenthusiastic dog—*ahem*, I mean Klaus—in tow, I headed back to my bedroom. Along the way, I reflected on the accounts I’d read about the demon lord. I didn’t want to drag any of my queries over to the next day—not if I could help it. Rather, by the end of today, I wanted to settle all the bits and pieces that gave me nagging concerns.

“Lady Rosemary,” Klaus called.

Among the information I’d gathered, the most important detail was the realization that the demon lord possessed the ability to amplify his avatar’s magical power. I wasn’t certain about that, but in my mind, the possibility seemed quite likely.

“Is it too cold for you, Lady Rosemary?”

“I’m all right.”

I don’t have a specific figure for how much amplification actually occurs; however, supposing it’s a hundredfold... If the avatar’s magical power is one, it’ll become one hundred under the demon lord’s influence. If it’s one hundred, then it’ll become ten thousand. In that case, there’d be quite a power disparity depending on whether the avatar is a swordsman or a sorcerer.

“When we get back, should I prepare you some warm tea?”

“I’ll just be going to bed, so no.”

Now I can see why it could be a gamble to let a sorcerer get close to the demon lord. The stronger a person’s magic, the more numerous the casualties would be if they became the demon lord’s avatar.

“We don’t want you catching a cold,” interrupted Klaus. “Please, don’t push yourself, and tell me how I can be of assistance.”

But some of the demon lord’s magical beasts had been covered by rock-hard shells, and others by thick skin, so there’d been a lot of cases where a swordsman or an archer just wouldn’t come out on top. Taking the demon lord’s defensive capabilities into account, as well as the might of the beasts under his control, any party formed to slay the demon lord would require a sorcerer.

“Nothing gives me more joy than to prove useful to you, Lady Rosemary. Please, tell me what to do. I’ll do anything.”

I clenched my fists in silence.

That’s it, I’m done. I can’t ignore him any longer. I’m trying to think things through, but I can’t concentrate with all this damn yapping. How dumb can this dog be?!

“Klaus.”

“Yes?!”

I turned my head and shot him a cold glare over my shoulder. “I’m trying to think. Please shut up.”

“Understood.”

When I said that, Klaus glumly drooped his head. I could almost see a pair of dog ears drooping too.

Uh, huh?

The mysterious drop in Klaus's mood got me worried. There was nothing new about me acting coldly toward him. So, why would he get so depressed *today*?

I pondered on whether anything had been different today compared to any other day, but nothing in particular sprang to mind. As a general rule, I wasn't kind to Klaus. In fact, I couldn't remember a single instance when I'd been genial.

When my thoughts ran that far, I began to despise myself a little. *I'm a pretty horrible person*, I thought.

After all the thorough devotion he'd shown me, I was far too unfair to him.

But, if I could be allowed to defend my actions, I did have something I could call a reason—Klaus was a troublesome entity that had raised his own masochism flag without any proactive encouragement from me. If I were to get too deeply involved with him, I'd have to worry about that flag rearing its head again, which heralded a twisted master-servant relationship between us. I'd already avoided that once, and I was determined to prevent it at all costs.

My opinion was that I didn't want to foster too intimate a relationship with Klaus. The distance we had as a guard and his charge was just fine for me. I wanted to maintain that separation, and then ensure an eventual smooth handover of Klaus to the shrine maiden.

However, that was only my personal intention and my own point of view. It had taken me too long to realize—all of that planning didn't justify my mistreatment.

"Klaus." I called his name, and he glanced over at me.

I felt throbbing pangs of guilt upon seeing the despondent look on his face. It was like an abandoned dog's. Klaus had probably been lonely since Sir Leonhart was the only one I'd been asking to accompany me recently. I'd been ignoring my own guard and relying solely on someone else.

Of course, I had a perfectly valid reason for doing so, and I wasn't about to apologize. It hadn't been easy teaching this dog to "stay," and I absolutely wasn't going to undo that progress. But I *was* at fault for what'd just happened. I'd turned my nose up at his kind gesture when he'd gone to the trouble of showing me concern.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "Could you make me that tea after all?"

Klaus's eyes widened and he gasped, then gave a reply like a bartender. "Coming right up!" His full-faced grin made his prior sullen attitude seem like a figment of my imagination.

I strained out a smile and breathed a soft sigh of relief. *I'm glad you've cheered up.*

"I'll brew the finest tea for you," he said. "I will!"

When I heard the cheerful reaffirmation of his determination, I froze for a few seconds, and then put on a slight smile. "Yeah. *Oh, lucky me.*"

If my tone lacked enthusiasm, and my eyes seemed hollow, I'd request for that to be overlooked. Because what I was about to endure was a self-imposed punishment.

I've mentioned before that Klaus was disastrously unsuited for any and all kinds of housework. There were a host of reasons for that: He was clumsy. He had an inattentive personality. Chief among them, however, was that he had no flair.

Please don't try to tell me that flair isn't essential for housework. It is. You *need* flair.

For example, flair is needed when you're cooking—you notice that a dish could do with a bit more flavor, so you choose a spice to add. In his current style, a few drops of Klaus's secret ingredient would be enough to overpower and mask the taste of the other ingredients. In a bad way, if that wasn't clear.

I could understand tea turning out bitter or astringent. That result only required putting in too many tea leaves and then boiling them for too long. But how had he gotten it to such a gloppy texture last time? And why had it been so sickly sweet?! Back then, I'd wondered whether he'd added some jam, like how

Russian tea is made, but he'd denied it.

"I haven't added anything particularly unusual," he'd said, which had only served to scare me.

Then why's the tea become viscous? Don't tell me, you're an alchemist? You can create something from nothing? I'd retorted in my mind.

"Hm?" In the present, a sudden thought scratched at the corner of my brain. I felt myself stop walking.

"Lady Rosemary?"

I ignored Klaus's surprised call to me and immersed myself in my own thoughts.

Creating something from nothing... That can't be done. It's impossible.

This wasn't a self-directed jab at my prior train of thought. Instead, I felt that I'd found the answer to a question I'd carried away from the king's bedroom.

That's it. That's exactly right. It's impossible.

One multiplied by ten thousand is ten thousand, but zero times anything is just zero. However immense the demon lord's power is, he can't amplify something that doesn't exist. He could have the capacity to amplify his avatar's power by a factor of, oh let's say, ten billion—but all of that is meaningless if the avatar has no magic to begin with.

"Ah." A dazed voice escaped my lips.

The answer I'd found was exceedingly concise. Therefore, it was cruel too.

Michael von Diebolt—the man who'd become the demon lord's avatar in *Hidden World*—was a magic user.

The Reincarnated Princess Contemplates

“Please pardon the wait.”

For ten seconds, I stared at the teacup he’d placed before me, completely frozen. I’d been holding my breath, but I released it now, forcing words of gratitude past my lips.

“Thank you.”

An amber-colored liquid had been poured to fill seventy percent of the fine-quality teacup, which was porcelain with an inlaid gold rim. The tea’s color looked normal enough... At the moment, there was no vile peril lurking anywhere visible.

After taking a large, deep breath, I reached out. My hands trembled considerably, and the teacup gave a rattling noise when I grabbed its handle. I drew my nose over the cup and checked the smell.

I had no composure to spare on acting elegant and enjoying the fragrance. The aim of my action was to collect olfactory information in order to detect danger. It served the additional purpose of functioning like a ritual to strengthen my resolve.

I sucked the air in and gasped. My eyes widened to their greatest extent, and I stared at the (supposed) tea.

It smells like...what black tea should...!!!

Although that should’ve been plainly obvious, the discovery shocked me to my core. No foul odor had tickled my nostrils. Instead, I was treated to a fresh and fruity fragrance. Based on the distinctive muscatel aroma, he’d likely utilized high-grade second-flush leaves, and it smelled identical to Darjeeling tea.

Though he might’ve used the same leaves last time, there’d been no muscatel in the scent profile, let alone in the taste. The liquid had been completely odorless, so there was no way I could’ve definitively recognized the particular

type of tea he'd used.

Actually, I wouldn't have been proud of myself if I *had* correctly discerned the variety, or if I'd realized that it'd been made from the most sought-after summer-picked leaves. Quite the contrary—drawing that conclusion from the toxic waste he'd served me, which had tasted criminal despite its lack of odor, would've been sacrilege to the world of tea.

"Hey, Klaus," I called out in a daze to my personal guard, who was standing a little distance away.

"Yes, Lady Rosemary?"

"It definitely was *you* who brewed this, right?" I asked, thinking that perhaps he'd realized that his flair for housework was abysmal, and he'd passed the job off to one of the maids.

Klaus, however, nodded his affirmation. "I did... Is there anything wrong with it?"

His easygoing good looks became clouded with apprehension.

Why do you pick this moment to be modest? I don't think that's fair. You're making it harder to admit that the absence of a problem is what's beginning to scare me.

"No, there isn't," I said. "I just thought it smelled nice."

Yep. It did smell nice. Which is, if anything, why I'm frightened.

Klaus's eyes lit up cheerfully when I voiced my compliment. A blush appeared on the youthful curves of his cheekbones, and he smiled from ear to ear.

"Truthfully," he admitted, "I've been practicing in secret. I wanted to be able to brew the delicious tea you love."

"R-Right..."

Just what is this guy's goal in life?

I found myself staring into the distance.

Uh-oh, no good. This is probably supposed to be a touching moment. This should be the scene where I'm struck by his devotion, and say, "You've done all

of that for me?"

What I must not do is cringe with all my might, all while questioning the purpose of a personal guard learning how to make tea. And, Rose, this is not the scene where I weep while reflecting on the plight of the head maid who had to suffer being Klaus's instructor.

Wait, actually. If he's been shown how, then... Could this tea actually be—wonder of all wonders—bona fide black tea?

A dash of hope took root in my heart as I gazed down at the rippling surface of the tea.

This might be okay. I took a big gulp of air and readied myself. For five seconds, I held my breath.

Then, I brought the amber-colored liquid to my lips.

My eyes flew wide open, and a large *boom* might as well have been drawn behind me, like in a manga.

A deep bitterness, an astringency, and also a sourness, prickly on my tongue, spread throughout my mouth. This was washed away a moment later by the arrival of a gooey saccharine taste. My grip on consciousness began to slip as a parade of flavors trampled through my mouth with enough vigor to annihilate my sense of taste.

Nothing's changed!!! I demand to see the person who got their hopes up thinking that this tea might be okay! Argh, that's me!!!

Talk about a trap—luring me in with a nice color and smell, then hitting me with that horrendous taste. I feel like I was convinced to let my guard down, only to take a big old knife in the back. This is so awful that I'd be better off treating it the same way I'd handle a scentless, tasteless poison.

I gripped harder with my fingers and reangled the cup upward, as my hands had started shaking so fiercely that I'd almost dropped it. I swigged the liquid into my mouth all at once. Unsure of whether I could bear to pick the cup back up again if I were to put it down, I swallowed every last drop, tears forming in my eyes, and disobeyed the call from my survival instincts to spit it back out.

“Th-Thank you...very much.” With labored breathing, I returned the emptied cup to its saucer.

Downing a cup of tea in one gulp wasn’t at all princess-y, but I had no regrets. My heart was overflowing with a sense of achievement.

Though my stomach was groaning and I was feeling bloated, I knew that the sensation would pass with time. At least, I expected it would... Probably. *Nobody feels bloated after a cup of tea... That can’t happen.*

“Just so I know, Klaus... Did you put anything in this tea?” I asked. The blood had drained from my face and I languidly pivoted my head toward my personal guard.

“No, nothing particularly peculiar comes to mind.” Klaus shook his head in response to my question, looking slightly confused.

“Right...” I let out an exhausted sigh, assuming that the tea had been some accumulation of miraculous coincidences brought about by Klaus’s disastrous lack of flair.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, looking like he had something in mind.

“What?” *Oh, so something poisonous did get mixed in there?*

“I filled it with the loyalty and respect I feel for you, Lady Rosemary,” he whispered with a sentimental grin.

“Please, spare me that.” A vein throbbed on my forehead. I expected that I could be excused for losing my temper. My voice sounded colder than ever before.



So it seems like the toxic substance included in my tea has turned out to be Klaus's loyalty and respect. I'm getting the idea that this man actually has it in for me.

"Uh, why're you smiling?" I asked.

For some reason, despite being subjected to my absolute-zero glare, Klaus was grinning happily. His smile was affable, unlike the smug one from a moment ago, and it disarmed me.

"You're finally back to your usual self," he said, then pointed to his forehead. "This whole time, you looked like something was troubling you."

After he pointed that out, my jaw dropped spontaneously.

Now that he mentions it, I was nervous and fidgety before going to my father's room, and after leaving, I couldn't think about anything other than the demon lord. Had he acted out of concern, in his own particular way, after seeing me doing nothing but furrowing my eyebrows and looking downcast?

"Sorry for making you worry about me," I said, putting on a strained smile, and he urged me not to mention it.

"Not at all," he said. "It was my own choice."

To be honest, I'm not enthralled by his implication that my default state features ice-cold glares and a blunt attitude...but just this once, I'll let it slide. And I won't fret about the fact that his remark should ordinarily be directed at someone who's started to smile.

"My own choice," I muttered, repeating his words verbatim, and he looked at me curiously.

"Lady Rosemary?"

"Klaus, could I ask you a question?" I asked.

"Anything."

"Hypothetically," I began, "say there was a person who'd suffered a grievous wound. He's always kept his wound hidden from sight, unable to show anyone for one reason or another. Do you think it'd be wrong to expose that wound

against his wishes?”

It was practically guaranteed that Michael, who’d become the demon lord’s avatar in *Hidden World*, was a magic user. And a rather puissant one at that, I expected, judging from the extent of the demon lord’s powers.

He’d kept it hidden until now though. He’d *managed* to. Was it truly okay for me to expose his secret?

“I’m not sure,” Klaus replied. “I wouldn’t recommend leaving the wound untreated though, since it could fester and the limb could rot away and fall off.”

“Right,” I said. “But as long as he can treat it himself, he might have a scar, but he could very well go about life without impediment.”

Teo had told me previously that anger was prone to draw out his magical powers, and so he would never remove his restrictive device, even now that his control had improved.

After taking all of his lessons in sorcery, Teo still didn’t have perfect sway over his power. This meant there was no guarantee that Michael wouldn’t lose control of his magic. On the other hand, Michael had made it through the past ten-plus years without anyone getting a whiff of his abilities, so he could’ve already mastered the control.

“It might be impossible to get rid of the scar completely, but the wound shouldn’t worsen, as long as he gives himself treatment and takes the right medicine. Even so, revealing his secret would hurt him. Emotionally, if nothing else. I might think my actions are just, but he might see it as me imposing my own will upon him.”

He’d have the opportunity to learn a lot if he became an apprentice sorcerer, and that would probably prove useful to him someday. I thought that he might rest easier if he had access to magic-restricting devices and people with the same powers as him, like Lutz and Teo.

But this world wasn’t a pleasant place for sorcerers. People would often look at them with morbid curiosity, or show them hatred, fear, and other negative emotions. People would develop sour perceptions of magic users, even when the sorcerer was a person they’d known all their lives. Sorcerers had their

movements restricted, and they even faced being targeted by villains.

Should I let it lie, or should I bring it into the open? What's the right choice as a princess? And which do I want to choose?

"Sorry," I said, "that was a strange thing to ask." Whatever the case, the decision was mine to make. Just because I couldn't handle the burden by myself didn't give me the right to mix Klaus up in this. "Forget what I said," I told him, putting on a forced smile.

"I'm not as insightful as you are," Klaus started, just as I was about to bring the discussion to an end.

"Huh?"

"So I don't know what's right and what's wrong," he continued. "But I do know that my master is far more proactive than her adorable appearance lets on."

Is that a compliment or an insult? Hard to tell.

After falling silent with an unconvinced expression, I let out a sigh and my face mellowed. "You're saying that it's not like me to stall in indecision?"

"Though you may sometimes regret your decision after having progressed down a road, you're not the sort of person to gaze wistfully at a path you could have traveled."

That's about as forceful a way to give someone encouragement as I can think of. It's better to regret trying something than to regret not trying. Talk about vague advice.

Saying that though, maybe I do feel like a weight's been lifted from my shoulders.

"Thank you," I whispered softly.

When I did, the personal guard, whom I'd always found so burdensome and annoying, smiled like an older brother.

Embarrassment for the Reincarnated Princess

“Lady Rosemary, shouldn’t you be leaving soon...?”

“Huh, it’s that time already?”

I’d been engrossed in my reading, and when Klaus called for me, I lifted my head out of the book. The blood drained from my face when I checked the clock.

Crap, I’ve only got ten minutes left before the time we’re scheduled to meet!

I noted my page with a bookmark and closed the volume’s cover, then leaped to my feet. After making myself a little more presentable, I exited the room.

I put emphasis on elegance as I racewalked since a princess mustn’t sprint down corridors...no matter how distressed she might be feeling. *What on earth is an elegant racewalk?* some might ask, but I wasn’t listening.

Today was the day—Miss Irene had set aside some time to tell us about the medicine we’d procured to counter the plague. George had expressed his desire to be there when we heard her presentation, so he’d be coming too. As would Michael, for some reason.

I’d planned to leave a little earlier, so I could be in the room ready to greet them when they arrived, but I was now dangerously close to being late.

What went wrong? I planned everything to give myself enough time... Maybe I destined my own downfall when I surrendered to curiosity and opened that book—it was from a foreign country and I’d gotten it from Lord Julius. But honestly, I thought I had plenty of time before we were all due to meet up.

I loved books, and while reading, I’d often lose track of time. Avid readers should understand. Many an afternoon I’d think, *Just a few more pages... Just one more*, eking out the experience bit by bit, and then two or three hours would pass me by. If someone said to me, “Well don’t pick up a book if you know that’s gonna happen,” I’d have to keep my mouth shut. But I couldn’t help being curious. This particular volume was a book from another country, and

about cooking to boot.

I'd initially opened the cover with the justification that I'd only read a little...but I couldn't recognize the letters inside. At first, I'd contented myself with just viewing the illustrations, but the text was inexplicably alluring, so I found myself looking up words.

The language seemed to belong to an island region that formed a constituent part of the Kingdom of Schner, but the words were a little different from standard Schnerian. At its core, the lexicon was similar, and the two languages clearly shared a common origin. *Is it like a dialect?* I wondered, and scavenged through a dictionary. While I was doing that, the time had zipped by in an instant.

I was something of a nerd in spirit—this tendency had so far been true in my previous life as well as this one, and I had a habit of thoroughly investigating everything that piqued my curiosity. What was worse, when I was researching things, I'd become impervious to the noises around me; I remembered how this trait had often earned the frustration of my friends and parents.

I'd never thought of it as a *bad* habit, but I might have to work a little to redress it, now that it was impeding my arrangements.

I galloped down the stairs. I was in a rush, so my gait threatened to become something fierce, but I took care to keep my footsteps as quiet as possible...

Hmm?

Because of that intent, my ears had been pricked up and attentive, and for some reason I heard the sound of bells. *Kling, kling*. It was a clear chime beating a regular rhythm.

After descending the stairs and rounding the corner, I glanced down and examined my outfit.

I don't remember attaching a bell to today's clothes or my accessories.

My floral-patterned dress was light pink and had a small ribbon on the bodice, as well as lace decorating the cuffs. However, it did not have a single metallic accessory. And there was only a small rose decoration on my lace choker. My low-heeled pumps had a very plain design too.

After I'd looked down to examine my footwear, I caught sight of a tiny shadow sliding up beside me, and my eyes shot wide open.

The adorable *tip-tap* of its footsteps was joined by the *cling, cling* sound of a bell. It continued past me as I watched on, stunned. After advancing a meter or so forward, it turned around. A black cat with lustrous fur caught me in its blue, jewellike eyes and tilted its head. A silver bell was attached to the red collar around its neck, and the metal chimed with a light clinking sound.

"Nero!" I said.

Hearing his name called, the cat replied with a lovely purr.

Oh, who's a clever kitty?! Wait, hang on!

I knelt down and scooped him up. Nero offered no resistance and settled into my arms. I gazed into his eyes and scolded him.

"What are you doing here?" I said. "I've *told* you not to go wandering around."

I put on a frown and tried to look stern, but Nero didn't appear to be frightened. He just looked up at me blankly with his large eyes.

God, you're cute! You're such a cute kitty! You'll make the whole world jealous with how cute you are!

He purred delightedly when I stroked the underside of his chin with one of my knuckles. This adorable little thing was called Nero. He was the cat that Michael had saved from being run over by my carriage, but I'd taken him home instead because Michael lived in the Great Temple and couldn't keep pets.

By this point, I was madly in love. While I might've been the sort of hopeless owner who wanted to grant her cat's every wish, like a grandfather doting on his first grandchild, I couldn't permit Nero to roam inside of the palace freely.

"You've only just recovered from your injury," I chided.

I gently parted the fur of his coat and found the scar on his right hip joint. This bite wound had left him unable to move, and that's the reason he'd nearly been hit by our carriage. The injury had been quite deep, so the scar still remained.

Strangely though, the wound had already healed on the day that I'd brought

Nero home, and before the week was over, he'd been prancing around my room like normal. I still didn't understand how that could've been possible when the injury had been serious enough to immobilize him.

Well, I might not have understood why, but I was glad that he was better. I was just scared of what might happen if something caused the wound to reopen, so I'd been trying to get him to stay in my room.

"I don't have the time to take you back...so I suppose I'll ask someone else to escort you." I muttered to myself as I walked, and Nero meowed a somewhat firm response. *I wonder what he's saying?*

He stretched his body up from within my arms and pawed at my cheek with his foreleg. The feeling of his paw pads lightly pressed against my skin was divine.

"Don't 'meow' me," I said. I brought the tip of my nose closer to Nero's face. He didn't flee but just meowed again.

Well, I have kept him locked up in my room despite his recovery, so could he be protesting that he wants me to let him outside occasionally? We won't be conducting any official business, and I'm close to everyone who'll be at the presentation, so I don't think anyone'll get mad at me for letting a cat tag along. Besides, this kitty's really well-behaved.

"Won't it be too noisy?" I asked.

"Meow."

"All right, we have a deal," I said, then chuckled and whispered, "I guess I'll try to get everyone else on board."

"Lady Rosemary," Klaus called out with a reproachful tone in his voice.

"Yes, what is it?" I answered without turning to face him.

I won't let him reprimand me for having a conversation with a cat. It's not like he doesn't witness this pretty much every day in my room. Klaus is supposed to be my personal guard, so it's about time he gets used to it.

All cat owners are fated to chat with their cherished pets...and also to occasionally revert to baby talk. I considered myself prudent enough to refrain

from that behavior when I wasn't alone, but the area near the greenhouse was practically deserted due to the firm restrictions on who had access to the space, so I wasn't worried about onlookers.

"Lady Rosemary," Klaus said again.

"For God's sake, *what*, Kl...aus?" I turned around, a little ruffled by Klaus's incessant calls, and then I froze in place.

Klaus wasn't the only one standing behind me, slightly off to one side.

I saw myself reflected in a pair of indigo-blue eyes that were wide open. Lutz stood there in stunned silence, his faint lips parted, leaving his mouth agape. To his side, Teo was pressing both his hands against the wall and hanging his head low. I couldn't see his expression from where I was standing. An awkward silence permeated the area.



Oof.

Klaus stood half a step behind them, and his eyes carried the message, "I tried to tell you."

What were you waiting for, Klaus? You shoulda told me sooner!!!

"What's going on?" Lutz asked, his face serious, and I immediately prayed for death.

"Not sure" is the only answer I could give to that query. There isn't some clear explanation for why people talk to cats! All I can say is that it's part and parcel of being a cat lover!

"What're you doing? What do you *want* to do? Scratch that, what are you trying to do to me?!" Lutz had started his line of questioning with a grumbling mutter, tone flat, but for some reason, he grew more and more energized, so by the end he was shouting.

"Uhh, I'm not trying to do anything to you...I don't think."

What am I trying to do? I'm not trying to do anything.

"Argh, what is this feeling?!" he exclaimed. "This churning sensation in my heart?!"

"Like...you wanna kill someone?" I asked. I watched his seemingly irritated behavior, and I went pale, fearing that he might be frustrated enough to turn to murder.

"No!" Lutz denied without delay. He groaned as he scratched at his chest. "Don't ask me why because I don't know myself...but I'm gonna come over there and dole out some serious petting, okay?"

Lutz began to make a grasping motion with his hands while fixing a steady gaze toward us, and I lurched a step back while shielding Nero, who was still in my arms.

"Uhhh, no thanks," I refused.

Nero's wound might've healed, but Lutz is acting too strange for me to hand him over. He's being kinda scary.

“Cats are delicate,” I explained. “You’ll frighten him if you pet him too roughly.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not after the cat.”

“What do you mean?” I retreated, but Lutz closed in on me. Klaus grasped the hilt of his sword, his eyes cold.

I do want Klaus to come to my rescue, but not with something so pointy.

“Lutz,” someone called. A large hand patted the ice sorcerer on the shoulder. The person who’d cut Lutz’s irregular actions short was his partner, Teo. A moment before, Teo had been pressed against the wall acting crestfallen, so when did he perk up?

Teo’s standard cheerful and chirpy grin had been replaced by a mild smile. His eyes looked tranquil, as though he’d attained enlightenment. He made eye contact with Lutz and slowly shook his head.

“That’s not it, Lutz,” he said. “Nobody’s saying that it’s okay to be rough as long as you’re not doing it to a cat.”

Teo spoke as though he was giving advice, but his words made no sense to me.

“What?” I said.

The two of them nodded to each other, leaving me on my own, tilting my head in puzzlement. I’d completely failed to grasp the meaning of their conversation.

“Women are more delicate than even cats,” Teo said, “and they get hurt more easily. You shouldn’t even contemplate being rough with them.”

Teo fixed an affectionate gaze on Lutz, who bit down on his own lip.

“You’re right...” Lutz relented. “The truth is, all I wanna do is listen to my surging emotions and smother her with affection.”

The sheer absurdity of the situation restored most of my mental faculties. *I guess it’s about time for me to take my leave? I don’t wanna keep George and the rest waiting.*

I slunk a step forward, aiming to make my exit without letting my footsteps be heard. However, at that very moment, Lutz and Teo turned to look at me simultaneously, as if on cue. I went rigid, dripping cold sweat.

“Which means...” Teo started, showing me his bright, broad grin. “It’s okay as long as we’re gentle. Right, Princess?”

“What’s okay?!” I instinctively retorted after Teo began to writhe his hands in the same manner as Lutz.

Behind Lutz and Teo, my personal guard drew his sword, wearing the same broad grin as they were. “I think I’ll save myself some trouble and let both of you taste my sword at once,” Klaus said. The vein bulging on his temple probably wasn’t a figment of my imagination.

Calling anyone with common sense—urgent assistance required!

The Reincarnated Princess Attends a Meeting

A woman showed up as if to answer my prayer. Her shoes clicked against the floor, and the sound echoed in the corridor. Slim and attractive, she wore black robes above a chic, dark blue dress, and high-heeled pumps on her feet. She carried a heavy pile of books in her slender arms.

The beautiful woman with tied-up, lustrous black hair pivoted her head around to look at each of us in turn, then squinted a monocle-clad almond eye. The corners of her painted lips twisted upward.

“My, isn’t this a rather interesting state of affairs?” she commented.

Teo and Lutz grimaced and froze at the arrival of Irene von Altman, the head sorceress. They let out a whimper, and Miss Irene treated them both to a sweet smile.



“You two must have an overabundance of energy if you’re starting fights in the hallways. You should’ve let me know, and I could’ve prepared a nonstop stamina-building training regime for you both. How about we go back this instant and get an immediate start on that? What do you say, my silly students?”

“We’re very sorry!” Lutz and Teo bowed their heads at once. They bent over, forming right angles at their hips, and held their arms straight by their sides. Their splendid posture would’ve awed even the sportiest of people.

You guys are sorcerers, right? I thought as I looked on, eyes vacant. “Klaus, you can put that nasty thing away too,” I ordered after languidly dragging my head up to look at him. I was already feeling exhausted, and the discussion hadn’t even started yet. He begrudgingly sheathed his sword.

You look nonplussed, but for the record, drawing your weapon in the palace when there isn’t even a crisis is way more problematic.

“Really now,” Miss Irene said, “the issue with these creatures we call ‘men’ is that, however old they get, they still act like children. Don’t you agree?” Miss Irene smiled gently at me after shooting a chilly glare at the men present. Her expression toward me held such warmth and was in direct contrast to how she spoke about the boys.

I didn’t want to crush Lutz’s heart by agreeing, so I just put on a vague smile and dodged the question.

“Hm?” Miss Irene dropped her gaze from me to the black cat that I held in my arms, then widened her eyes slightly. Nero was friendly, so her intense stare didn’t spook him. He tilted his head and looked up at her. The stern look in Miss Irene’s expression vanished when Nero meowed softly.

“My, how adorable,” she said. “Is he yours, Princess?”

“Yes,” I replied. “His name’s Nero.”

Still holding the books in one arm, Miss Irene reached toward Nero with her free arm and tickled his chin with one of her knuckles. Nero let her, looking pleased. Perhaps she liked cats since she was acting more warmly than usual. I perceived that now would be the perfect time to have her listen to my request,

although I did feel a little ashamed for taking advantage of Nero's cuteness.

"Excuse me, Miss Irene. I'm sorry for bringing up my private matters, but could you give me permission to take Nero in with us?" I asked timidly.

As soon as I asked, she nodded without a moment's hesitation. "I don't mind. After all, everyone in attendance is an acquaintance of yours, and most importantly, this cat looks to be quite smart and well-behaved. I don't think he'll be any trouble." Then, glancing sideways at Lutz and Teo, she added an insult. "I wish I could say the same for my foolish students."

The two of them held their mouths tightly shut, eyes fixed on the floor.

"Neither of you have any objections, I take it?" she asked, although her tone could no longer be called inquiring.

That was pretty much an order camouflaged as a question, I thought.

"None whatsoever," the two boys stood up straight and answered, speaking in unison. It was an exemplary display of coordination. Their desperate attempt to avoid Miss Irene's wrath felt like a breath of fresh air.

Lutz was scrawny, so I could understand him shying away from the stamina-building regime, but I was very curious to find out what the regime entailed, since even Teo, who was quite well-built, showed such stubborn opposition to it.

But right now, I've gotta prioritize the guests waiting for us.

Though we'd faced delays from one surprise after another, we were now headed for the meeting room.

The living room where the meeting was to be held was about fifty square meters in area. Three of the walls were decorated with paintings, and there were intricate engravings of ivy on the ceiling. Beneath an extravagant dangling chandelier, George and Michael stood up from their chairs.

When I apologized for keeping them waiting, they both forgave me with smiles. George shot me a confused look upon seeing the cat I'd brought with me, so I gave a rundown of what had happened.

Beside him, Michael recognized Nero and quietly mumbled, "Oh, it's *that*

cat.”

“That’s right,” I said. “It’s the one you saved.”

“I’m glad he looks well,” Michael remarked.

Nero stretched from within my arms and looked up with great interest. When Michael saw that, the corners of his eyes dropped contentedly. I broke into a smile too, understanding that the tender tone in Michael’s voice meant that his words were heartfelt.

I kept my smile in place, and to reassure him, I said, “His wound took no time at all to heal. He’s actually on his feet and walking around already.”

However, for some reason, Michael’s expression stiffened. He held his breath, grimacing as though he’d swallowed something he shouldn’t have. His hand had been outstretched to stroke Nero, but he stopped midway and snatched it back.

“Michael?”

He was acting strangely. I stared at him, but he turned his face away from me; when his head sank, I grew apprehensive.

Was it something I said?

“Shall we begin, Princess?” Miss Irene called out to me.

“Oh, uhh, yes, let’s.” I took my seat.

Michael had never met Miss Irene, so they introduced themselves to each other, but not once during that exchange did Michael look my way.

I’m a little shocked... Okay, maybe a lot.

“Well then. Miss Irene,” I began. I put on a brave face as I brought up the main topic. “About the medicine I delivered to you—could you tell us the results of your investigation?”

I can feel upset later, but right now, I’ve got more important things to do, I told myself.

Miss Irene opened and spread the paper containing the medicine across the top of the mahogany table. The pills had been crushed into a powder.

“A close examination of the finely ground medicine revealed a faint-red

tinge,” she explained. “Judging from this texture, the medicine was likely developed from tree bark or something similar.”

“Bark?” George repeated Miss Irene’s conclusion as he stared fixedly at the medicine.

“The grind is too rough to have come from leaves or roots,” Miss Irene replied. “I expect that they added a runny substance and a thickener to the bark and then kneaded the mixture to solidify it. The smell is faint, and the taste rather bitter.” Miss Irene opened one of the thick books that she’d brought along. “Medicines derived from bark aren’t particularly common. The only ones that have been recorded in Nevel are...”

She tilted the book toward us. Her pale fingers pointed to various illustrations of trees and explanatory descriptions which filled the page—there was a tree festooned with small blooming gold petals, one growing large glossy leaves, and another with yellow inner bark. Miss Irene guided us through the effects of each variety in detail.

“But none of them have the same function as this medicine,” she said. “Unfortunately, the only sample at our disposal has already been refined into pills, so it would be difficult to perform a comparison, even if we conducted a very thorough investigation of each individual tree. As such, I’m afraid to say that identifying the medicine is infeasible at this point in time.” After concluding the main points of her explanation, Miss Irene lowered her beautiful eyebrows and exhaled a little sigh.

I’d been unpleasantly reminded of the scarcity of leads, and I was, as could be expected, in low spirits. Silence had enveloped the room. In the midst of that atmosphere, Teo, who’d been keeping quiet as though he’d been in deep thought, raised his hand.

“Can’t we use magic to find out what it is?” he asked. “Sorcerers often borrow nature’s power, and we’re adept at tracking down natural phenomena that match our own affinity, right?”

“Correct,” Miss Irene responded. “Just as a water-affinity sorcerer could locate the source of a river, and a wind-affinity sorcerer could read the flow of the air and the weather—in the same way, an earth-affinity sorcerer might be

able to discern what this medicine is and locate its origin. However, as you are well aware, no earth-affinity sorcerers reside in the palace.”

There were apparently some sorcerers earning a living by administering medicine in the countryside, but Nevel’s government hadn’t taken custody of them, which spoke volumes about how little power the sorcerers wielded. According to Miss Irene, an ordinary person with a talent for gardening could match their abilities. They might be able to bring in the harvest a day or two earlier or give plants some resistance to withering, but that was about it. Chances were that enlisting the help of these sorcerers would amount to nothing.

“We have a few clues, so it seems that all we can do is diligently look into them, one by one,” George said.

He was right. The prospect seemed daunting, but at present, we had no other options.

The inquiry into the port admission records had already finished, and it’d been discovered that the ship carrying the medicine had belonged to the Kingdom of Flanmer. We’d so far ascertained that the ship had departed from a port town along the coast of the western sea, but we’d then entrusted the rest of the detail gathering to Lord Julius.

Some intel could still find its way into his hands, so let’s keep at it and not give up hope.

The meeting came to an end for the day, and we all stood up.

I was having a pleasant conversation with Miss Irene after thanking her for her time, but then I heard someone calling me from behind.

“Sorry... Mary?”

“Yes?” I answered. When I turned around, I saw George standing there, his face drawn in a nervous expression. I tilted my head slightly, puzzled at what there was to be anxious about now that the meeting was over. When I showed my confusion, his expression stiffened even more.

What in the world’s the matter with him?

“Do you need me?” I asked.

“Umm... I...” George stuttered and stammered and broke eye contact.

The way he was blushing and staring at his feet gave me the impression of a sweet young girl. His features had developed in a masculine way, but he still pulled certain facial expressions that reminded me of Emma.

Look at you, girl!

“C-Could you show me around the greenhouse? O-O-Only if you don’t mind, of course!”

“The *greenhouse*?” I inadvertently questioned. I didn’t mean anything by it—I was just surprised to hear George express an interest in plants.

However, he began to fret and suddenly submitted a rapid-fire defense of himself. “I, umm, don’t have any ulterior motives! I’d heard that the palace cultivated a large number of rare medicinal herbs in the greenhouse, so I just thought...that I’d love to have a chance to see them!”

“R-Right.” I took a step back, overwhelmed.

Realizing that he’d spooked me, George cleared his throat and mumbled a quiet apology. I saw that his cheeks were flushed with embarrassment, so I shook my head to tell him not to worry about it.

George’s intensity had taken me by surprise, but it had also cleared up my misapprehension. After spending time as Lord Julius’s assistant, he must’ve been naturally drawn toward precious items...which is to say, items that could be marketable.

Generally, only authorized personnel are allowed access to the greenhouse, but maybe George could be let in?

I looked to Miss Irene for her decision, and generously, she nodded. Now that I’d received her permission, I turned back to George.

“You can. I’ll take you there myself—”

But just before I could smile and agree to take him, I was cut off mid-speech.

“Stop right there!”

At first, a pale hand obstructed my vision. Next, a body squeezed its way into the space between myself and George. The figure's black robes were made of exquisite fabric, and the hem flapped up a moment later. This boy was facing away from me, so I could only see the back of his head. Even so, I wouldn't have needed to see his face to recognize him, not when his silver, almost-white hair was so distinctive.

"Lutz?" I called.

"I'll show you the greenhouse," Lutz said.

"Huh?" I was stumped.

How'd it turn out like this? Lutz is going out of his way to volunteer to be George's guide...but why? They've only just met. And Lutz, of all people! He's as shy as can be! I just don't get it.

And I also don't understand why he had to elbow his way between us. Why couldn't he just join the conversation like a normal person would? These questions darted through my mind, one after another, leaving me perplexed.

Teo lined up beside me. He gazed into my eyes and a gentle smile pulled at his lips. "Princess, you gotta take that cat back to your room, right?" Teo asked this while staring at Nero in my arms.

He had a point—it wouldn't be fair to drag the cat all over the palace. Nero was asleep and must've nodded off at some point out of boredom.

"You're right," I admitted. "Very well. Could I leave George to you, then?"

"Huh?"

Lutz turned to look over his shoulder, then grinned and nodded. "Of course. We'll get it done."

I could've sworn that I'd heard George's voice as well, but my vision was impaired to my front and side by Lutz and Teo, so I couldn't see his face. The two of them had begun their growth spurts, and so they loomed ever taller over me by the day. Their bodies formed an insurmountable wall.

I poked my head out from behind Lutz and looked at George. "Is that all right with you too, George?"

He frowned, fell silent for a while, and then agreed. "Sure."

"Why don't you go along too, Michael?" I asked, turning my gaze to the other boy.

He was still in his seat, and his face lurched up when I called out to him.

"Oh, er, yes? What's the question?"

"Lutz and Teo are going to show George the greenhouse. Would you like to join them?" I explained in simple terms since it seemed that he hadn't been paying attention to the conversation.

"I, uhh." Michael's voice faltered, and he bit down slightly on his lip. His gaze flitted around the room as though in hesitation before he affixed it to Miss Irene. She'd been gathering the books on top of her desk.

"Do you need something?" she asked after noticing his gaze.

"Umm, Head Sorceress...could I have...a moment of your time, please?" Though stammering desperately, he managed to get all of his words out.

His surprising request made my jaw drop, but Miss Irene simply blinked a few times. She peered at Michael, and beneath her monocle, he was reflected in her jet-black pupils, which gleamed with intelligence. She was staring straight at him, and his shoulders squirmed and flinched. For all his trembling though, he didn't look away.

Miss Irene glanced down and let out a single sigh. "You may," she said.

She picked up her books, instructed Michael to follow, and then began to walk away. Michael snapped out of his dazed state and followed Miss Irene from the room.

Is Michael going to confide in her about his magical powers? I wondered, watching him exit. *He's kept it a secret all this time, so if that's the case, then what prompted his sudden change of heart?*

"What's the matter with Michael?" George asked.

He sounded confused, but I didn't know how to answer his question.

Anxiety from the Son of a Marquis

“Right, I’ll be leaving now.” Mary bent forward slightly in an elegant bow. “Take a nice, long look around the palace, George. I think that you’ll enjoy seeing the greenhouse. Some of the plants there are quite rare.”

She stood up straight again, and the gentle waves of her platinum-blond hair bounced softly. Her gaze narrowed gently as she looked at me, and I saw myself in the marine-blue of her crystal clear eyes. Her thin pink lips formed a smile, and a mild blush appeared on the curves of her cheekbones.

When she turned her lovely smile to me, I felt my cheeks flush.

“Thank you...very much,” I answered briefly, forcing my voice out. I just about managed to keep it from squeaking.

It had only been a few days since I’d been reunited with my first crush, and her beauty shone even brighter than I remembered from back then. I couldn’t look directly at her.

I felt so pathetic I could cry. I wanted to be closer to her, but everything I did ended in failure.

“Teo, Lutz, I’ll hand the rest over to you both,” Mary said to the two sorcerers standing beside me.

“You can count on us.” The burly, dark-skinned boy held his head high as he answered.

“Make sure you go back to your room—no dillydallying,” the slim, silver-haired boy instructed sternly. But his eyes looked kind, and I doubted that he’d meant anything hostile.

As if confirming my hypothesis, Mary answered with a gentle smile and didn’t appear to have taken offense. “Sure, sure.”

There was a relaxed mood in the air; it felt as though there were no nobles or commoners here, but rather, just *people*. Though I was supposedly in the same

place as them, for some reason, I felt like an outsider.

I watched Mary leave the room while grappling with a sense of longing.

“Right,” the silver-haired one said. The two sorcerers spun back around and wiped away the easy smiles they’d been wearing a moment ago.

The slim boy—Lutz—glanced at me with his indigo eyes, and his gaze poked through the gaps between the thin silver threads of his hair.

“Let’s get this over with,” he said. “We’ve got other things to do.”

His stare seemed piercing, and so did his tone. This hostility I was feeling...was it just my imagination?

The dark-skinned boy—Teo—flicked Lutz lightly on the back of the head.

“Don’t be rude,” he warned. “This is the princess’s important guest.” Then he addressed me. “I apologize for him. He’s not great with people, but he’s an okay guy.”

Teo wore an amicable smile when he apologized, but his eyes didn’t look amused.

“No, it’s fine.” I grinned as I replied, but on the inside, I was thinking, *Looks like I’m not particularly welcome here*. My smile might’ve appeared forced, but I think I should be forgiven for that.

We arrived at the greenhouse, although the awkward atmosphere was unnerving. By this point, my curiosity had been dwarfed by negative emotions, but after my first step inside the lush room, my somber feelings vanished instantaneously.

The walls were paned glass on all sides, and the size of the room exceeded my every expectation. It was twenty meters long—no, maybe more. Bricks demarcated the flower beds, and a variety of plants grew inside each space. Water flowed through narrow passages along the sides of the beds. There was also a multitude of potted plants positioned on shelves that had been erected in one corner of the room. Droplets of water on the plants glistened in the brilliantly reflected sunlight which shone through the domed ceiling.

“Spectacular.” My amazement spontaneously slipped out in words.

I hadn’t doubted that a palace greenhouse would be an extravagant structure, but this wondrous space far surpassed what I had imagined.

I surveyed my surroundings as I ventured toward the rear of the room. There, I found not just more canals, but also a pond. Round leaves and thin stalks protruded from the greenish water.

“Is that a sacred lotus?” I asked.

Teo positioned himself next to me as I gazed into the pond.

“It is,” he said. “You can make medicine out of it too.”

“You can?”

“Yes,” Teo replied. “We pick the fruit in autumn, then divide the fruit from the seeds inside. We lay them out separately to dry in the sun and in the shade. Of course, the leaves, stalks, and roots can all be made into medicine as well.”

“So each part of it is useful,” I remarked.

I took another peek into the murky water. While I gazed at the lotuses, Lutz walked over to my other side.

“As for their functions, the fruit can be used for analeptics, sedatives, and even for antidiarrheal drugs, while the leaves and stalks mainly become hemostatic medicines. You can eat the roots too.”

I turned to look at Lutz without thinking, surprised that he would give me such a thorough explanation.

“What?” he asked, returning my stare with an irritated glare from his half-open eyes. His scowl seemed to be saying, *What do you think you’re looking at?* So I flicked my gaze away and replied evasively.

“Nothing... Just, you two really know what you’re talking about.” I considered it best not to be stupidly honest and reply, *I never imagined you’d actually give me the full guided tour.*

“Obviously we do,” Lutz sighed. “We’ve been training to be sorcerers for over two years now, so of course we’re gonna know this much.”

“Huh,” Teo remarked. “That means we’ve known the princess for more than two years as well.”

“Mary?” My eyes shot wide open after hearing Teo speak. *They actually met Mary so soon after coming to the palace to be apprentice sorcerers?*

These boys had been present in Mary’s life for two years when I wasn’t. The thought pricked at my heart.

“*Mary*, is it?”

I’d unconsciously pressed a hand to my chest as my head sank, but Lutz’s low voice brought me back to reality.

I turned to my side and was met with a threatening glare. The depth of his dark mood was incomparable to what had come before. Lutz was glowering at me, his eyes cold and brows deeply furrowed.

“I thought I heard you call her that earlier,” Lutz said. “Guess I wasn’t hearing things. You know her well enough to call her by a nickname?”

“I, uhh... That’s not...”

“You’re not gonna say you’re her fiancé or something like that, are you?” Teo asked from my other side. He was smiling, but his flame-like eyes harbored no shred of warmth.

Despite feeling the intense pressure on either side of me, I only blushed and cast my head down. I knew that the situation called for a different reaction, but I wasn’t mature enough to respond in a levelheaded manner about whether I was engaged to my first love.

“I’m not her...fiancé.” My voice grew quiet near the end of my denial. I sensed suspicious looks coming from either side of me.

“Sounds like there’s more to it,” Lutz said.

“So you’re not her fiancé, but ‘fiancé’ isn’t far off the mark?” Teo asked, no longer smiling.

It seemed that my half-hearted approach had only aroused their displeasure even further. I shook my head from side to side. “I was one of her potential fiancés. It was a long time ago. The chances of that future coming to fruition

have been dead for some time now.”

My lingering affection for her had prevented me from denying it immediately. Maybe somewhere in my heart, I’d been naive enough to reason that we’d be afforded another chance after we’d grown up, even if the idea had been put aside once already.

“*One* of her potential fiancés...? Does that mean that the princess is already engaged?!” Lutz cried out.

“No,” I said. “I doubt it. If Mary had entered an engagement, word would’ve spread to my family.”

“Oh... Thank God.” Lutz wiped the sweat from his brow. Teo, however, was still deep in thought, looking uncertain. “What’s wrong?” Lutz asked him.

“Hmm,” Teo mumbled. “Something seems odd.”

“What does?”

“The fact that the princess doesn’t have a fiancé. I think this subject is too complicated to just say ‘thank God’ and put an end to the conversation.”

“What?!” Lutz gripped my shoulder and pushed me out of the way so he could yell at his friend. “Have you lost your mind, Teo? ‘Thank God’ is exactly what we should be saying. We’re talking about *the princess* getting engaged, so don’t give me that! Or do you not care if she goes off to be with some nobody?!”

“We’re the nobodies here.” Teo squinted his eyes in frustration at Lutz’s outburst. However, his expression rapidly grew grave. “That’s not it. I don’t want the princess to leave and marry anybody either. But that’s not what I’m talking about.” With a hand on his forehead, Teo closed his eyes and shook his head. He grumbled in irritation and paused for a moment. “If she had multiple potential fiancés, how come none of them managed to become her *real* fiancé?”

“Because none of them were up to scratch?” Lutz gave a blunt answer to Teo’s question.

I smiled wryly at his directness. “I’m standing right here, you know? You really

don't mince your words." I would rather him be a bit more oblique about it, but this was much more preferable to hearing disingenuous flattery.

"You think so?" Teo asked Lutz. "Putting aside my personal feelings, I can't see any problems with him. He's more friendly than I'd ever have expected from an heir to a marquis, and he hasn't even pulled us up on how rude we've been to him."

"You're right," Lutz conceded. "He's not what I'd imagined he'd be. Like when he said he wanted to see the greenhouse, I assumed that was just him trying to spend some time with the princess, but it seemed like he was listening to our explanations in earnest."

"And he didn't shrink away from being together with us," Teo continued. "We might only be apprentice sorcerers, but we're sorcerers all the same."

"Guess so," Lutz agreed with Teo, although somewhat grudgingly. "But he still didn't get picked."

Just as their high praise started to cheer me up, those last words gouged at my heart.

Are you trying to build me up or break me down? Make up your minds!

"That's my point," Teo said. "Maybe there's some other reason...something besides a problem with the potential fiancés."

"Another reason? Like what?" Lutz tilted his head, looking as though Teo's words were lost on him.

"I'm not sure..." Teo fell silent in response to Lutz's question, but he looked troubled.

Lutz crossed his arms behind his head, and his eyes rolled around the room in deep thought.

"She probably just got too valuable," he muttered briefly.

"What?" Teo asked.

"The princess is beautiful, and smart, and she's good-natured too. I bet they came to think that she was too valuable to hand over to some noble kid," Lutz said dispassionately.

“You’re something else, you know that?” Teo said, deflated. “You’re giving me a headache,” he murmured while holding his head in his hands.

A lighthearted atmosphere filled the room, but I felt an inexplicable unease.

“Too valuable...” I repeated Lutz’s words quietly.

The idea had seemed crazy, but it preyed upon my mind. I couldn’t bring myself to dismiss it as ridiculous.

The Reincarnated Princess Has a Discussion

I heaved a sigh and stared at the sentences written on discolored paper, though I wasn't actually reading.

I didn't know what Michael had discussed with Miss Irene on the day of our meeting. Though I was curious about whether he'd asked for her advice regarding his magical powers, confronting him directly didn't seem like a good idea. I'd find myself in a bind if he were to turn around and ask me how I knew that he was a magic user, and I didn't trust myself to weasel my way out of that question properly. And, as a more fundamental problem, I hadn't encountered either of them since that meeting, so I'd simply had no opportunity to ask.

Even in *Hidden World*, information regarding Michael's life prior to being taken over by the demon lord had been exceptionally scarce. I had no idea what he was thinking, or what he was planning to do.

I exhaled a second sigh and felt infuriated by the extent of my own worthlessness. I'd basically lived my life up until this point with a strategy guide. My course had been simple; since I had foreknowledge of the traps, all that I had to do was avoid them.

But that had changed. Breaking flags and sidestepping one ill-omened future after another had resulted in a present situation with some fairly large differences from *Hidden World*. My knowledge from the game would no longer be enough—I needed to learn how to walk without the aid of a compass.

"Hey."

"Huh?! Oh!!!" I jumped when I heard a sudden call from behind me. Simultaneous to my surprise, a hand reached over my shoulder and snatched the book that I'd rested on my lap. I twisted my body, turning around to snatch it back, but then I froze.

I was pierced with a glare from pale-blue eyes that were squinted in displeasure.

“Nobody is forcing you to read if you don’t want to.” His tone was unfriendly and devoid of all warmth.

I’ve messed up. I muttered this in my mind while trembling at the feeling of cold sweat dripping down my spine.

He sat upright on the large chaise lounge and slammed the book shut in irritation. I wanted to reprimand him for handling such a historically valuable tome so crudely, but that would’ve been hypocritical; when I’d had that precious book open in front of me, all I’d done was daydream.

I dropped down from the end of the chaise where I’d been sitting and planted my feet on the floor. After taking a deep breath, I tensed my abdomen, adopted a serious expression, and stood with straight posture.

“I’m terribly sorry, father.”

He knitted his brows deeply upon seeing me bow my head.

“For what?” he asked in a sharp tone of voice. His young daughter’s sincere apology hadn’t lightened his mood one bit.

On my end, I was disappointed in myself; I’d allowed my mind to wander aimlessly despite knowing what my father was like.

This was my fourth nighttime visit to the king’s room. Between us, we’d exchange little to no conversation, and perhaps the tranquility that I’d felt while reading books in silence had slackened my guard somewhat. Of course, that was no excuse for acting like an idiot.

I chewed on my lip, at a loss for a proper response. My father had lifted one leg and was resting his chin on it. He shot me a chilly look.

“I’ve asked you to tell me what you’re apologizing for,” he repeated once more.

“F-For...” My voice trembled nervously. I kept my head fixed forward, resisting the urge to stare at my feet. “For o-opening the book when I didn’t plan to read it,” I managed to finish saying, all too honestly.

I seem to remember something like this happening the first time I visited my father’s room. When he’d asked me whether I could read the book, I’d told him,

"I can't, but I will." What a stupid thing to say... I'm still stuck at the same level.

But what else could I do? I don't have the brains or the guts to devise some clever excuse, so I'll just have to face him with what I do have.

"For wasting my opportunity to read this valuable book by daydreaming and concentrating on other matters." I bowed my head again. "I'm sorry."

My father sighed, sounding exasperated. "You're gravely mistaken if you're under the impression that honesty will get you off the hook."

Though his words were harsh, his tone and facial expression had softened a little. He'd been holding the book beyond the range of my reach, but he now shoved it back to me.

I was stunned at how simple it'd been to convince him to return the book, but once I came back to my senses, I grasped the tome with both hands and held it tightly against my chest.

My father grabbed a bottle from the table and poured the entirety of the remaining wine into a glass. I watched him chug the drink without stopping to savor the taste, and then he curtly muttered, "Sit."

I cleared enough space to fit myself in and then sat down beside him. My heart was beating rapidly, so I exhaled softly to slow the thumping in my chest.

I pledged to myself that I'd concentrate on the text this time so that he'd have no excuse to kick me out. I went to open the cover, but when I noticed him looking at me from my side, my hand stopped. As much as I wanted to pretend that he wasn't there, ignoring him and reading on would've taken more courage than I could muster. I glanced at him timidly.

"What was distracting you?" he asked.

"Ummm..."

"You're concerned about something, are you not? Tell me."

His words took a little while to comprehend. My eyes shot wide open, and I stared at my father's face.

It sounded like he'd prompted me to talk with him about my concerns... Am I hearing things? I must be. He'd never ask for that, right?

“I-It’s not such a severe concern that I should trouble you for advice, fa—”

“I said nothing about giving advice. I’ll listen, and that’s it.”

“Oh, right.”

Yep, of course!!!

His words had aggravated me, but I felt relief as well.

Haughty. That’s the father I know. Phew.

For a second there, I thought that I’d slipped into a parallel world. It’s a load off my mind, but what do I tell him now? I can’t let him know about Michael’s magical powers. There must be something less explosive that I can bring up...

After some time thinking, I began to speak. “I’m concerned about my lack of adaptability.”

“Adaptability?”

“Yes. I have trouble reacting to unforeseen situations. I’ve become solely accustomed to preparing myself for events that are, to a certain extent, foreseeable. However, I’m insufficiently flexible in my responses to the unforeseen.”

My father neither denied nor confirmed what I’d said. He simply turned his gaze to me, urging me to continue.

“In every respect, I’m not good enough,” I said. “I’m not quick-witted in a pinch, and I’m not decisive. When confronted with the unexpected, I just panic and achieve nothing. I can’t stay like this.”

Even if the future from this point onward were to fundamentally diverge from *Hidden World*, I couldn’t afford to falter in indecision. “I didn’t know” would be no excuse; “I didn’t understand” wouldn’t work as a defense.

I gripped my hands together even tighter above the book on my lap.

“I want to be able to respond appropriately to any situation whatsoever.” I blurted this out as I watched my nails dig into my skin.

After a period of silence, my father whispered, “I see.”

I turned my head toward him and then shuddered. His all-too-perfect face

was much closer to mine than I'd anticipated. My eyes opened as large as they could. He heaved a heavy sigh while watching my reaction at close range.

"It turns out that my daughter is as stupid as they come."

I sat stuck in place for a full five seconds before my father's words at last registered in my brain.

"What?" I let slip in a low tone of voice. A vein throbbed on my forehead.

What did this bastard just say? First, he twists my arm into spilling my concerns, then he goes and says that?

My face was contorted in rage, and he watched me glare at him. He then tilted his head as though puzzled. The silken threadlike strands of his platinum-blond hair swayed smoothly, casting shadows on his fair skin. Even small gestures like that looked fit for a work of art.

This pissed me off all the more.

Can you stop being so beautiful for one minute!!! I almost screamed nonsensically.

"Father, what did you just say?"

"I said that my daughter is as stupid as they come," he repeated slowly, as though he were teaching a child.

You have quite the talent for rubbing people the wrong way, you rotten old man.

"You want to be able to respond to any given situation?" my father snarled, not deigning to hide his frustration. "You, who've been alive for just ten years? Who do you think you are?"

Uhh, maybe a princess?! I felt like saying. But in reality, all that I could manage was to bite down on my lip as my face turned scarlet from anger and embarrassment.

He's got me riled up, so much so that I feel about to burst, but I don't have anything to answer back. The truth is readily apparent; I'm a powerless and ignorant kid, and that's an unmistakable fact.

“In the first place, what person *could* react perfectly to an unpredictable situation?” he mused. “You might as well be asking to become a god.”

“But you and Chris can, can’t you?” I felt compelled to argue against my father’s insistence that it was impossible.

I recalled the sorcerer abduction plot. I’d had foreknowledge of the scheme from the character backgrounds in *Hidden World*, but unlike me, my father and Chris had no prior information. Despite that, and despite me having cheat powers, they’d uncovered the plot at the same pace as I had. And as a result, the abduction had come to a peaceful conclusion and war had been averted.

From my standpoint, that was practically miraculous. If my father and Chris had the ability to detect and prevent pitfalls that lay in wait for them, then I wanted to learn that trick for myself.

However, my father wasted no time in shooting down my counterargument.

“That’s why I called you stupid.”

“Oof...” I grunted and grasped at my chest.

He’s cut me. He’s diced me with his words.

Exhaling a frustration-ridden sigh, my father lifted one leg onto the chaise and swiveled his body to face me. I looked up reflexively and met his gaze. Surprisingly, neither his expression nor his tone was as harsh as his words.

“Now listen,” he instructed. “Reconsider what is truly unpredictable.”

I hadn’t expected those words, and I felt turned to stone. I’d braced myself for a scolding, a remonstration of my imperfections. And yet, what he actually said to me was more like guidance or advice, delivered in a matching tone of voice. It would’ve been impossible to stay composed.

“What do you mean...?” I asked.

“Most occurrences are preceded by what you could call a ‘sign,’” he explained. “You simply haven’t noticed them. In short, what makes a difference is whether you can detect those signs.”

“Signs.” I whispered the word back to myself, and my father nodded.

After appearing to mull something over for a second, he pointed at the book I was holding. “Let’s take that tome you’re clinging to so carefully as an example. Say that it were left on this table for an hour, and during that time it became damaged. What would you conclude was the cause?”

I blinked my eyes a few times, startled by the sudden hypothetical. Though confused, I glanced down at the table as he’d said.



On the tabletop was an empty bottle, a glass half-filled with wine, and a candlestick.

I pinched my chin and considered the possibilities, then began to speak. “I’d say that either the candlestick was knocked over somehow, causing the flame to spread and incinerate the book, or perhaps the glass tipped over, spilling the wine onto the pages.”

I’d contemplated my options in earnest before giving my response, but he just laughed at me scornfully.

“Not the most interesting answers.”

“Is that so?” I replied in a flat tone of voice, even while shaking my fist at him in my mind.

“Fine,” my father continued after making light of my hard work. “So we’ll say that the candlestick toppled and incinerated the book. In that case, were you powerless to stop it?”

“No. It would’ve been enough to blow out the candle flame, or take the candlestick out of the room with me.”

“Exactly. The same goes for the wine. If you’d drunk it all, or cleared it away, it would’ve been simple to prevent the book from coming to harm.”

As though to demonstrate this, my father picked up his glass and finished the rest of the wine.

In a roundabout way, I was beginning to understand why my father had brought this topic up in our conversation. The idea was simple and easy to grasp—books were flammable and prone to water damage, so it was exceptionally dangerous to leave them unattended next to water or open flames. That wasn’t a conclusion that had to be drawn retrospectively; it was readily surmisable.

The fact that my father and Chris had stopped a war hadn’t been a miracle. And they hadn’t needed godlike powers of insight.

“We can implement proactive countermeasures if we have prior information. Is that what you’re trying to tell me?” I mumbled.

He didn’t reply, but I sensed a slight, amused narrowing of his eyes, which

reflected my image like a pool of water.

My answer might've fallen short of perfect, but it hadn't been entirely off the mark either. With that optimistic interpretation in mind, I reflected on the Lutz abduction plot.

Even for a sorcerer, Lutz possessed a power that was rare in this world where magic was beginning to fade from existence. The possibility of a foreign country attempting to get their hands on him was easily imaginable. Moreover, Skelluts—the kingdom that had ordered the abduction—was a hostile nation run by a warmongering king.

Both Skelluts and Lutz had unmistakably been characters of interest. Once I realized that I tilted my head.

Given that, why had Lutz's abduction been successful in Hidden World?

Chris and my father were exactly as competent as they had been in *Hidden World*. And Lutz's and Teo's entry into the palace had probably taken place in the same way and at the same time as in the game.

Both the book and the candlestick were under vigilant guard, so how had the book caught fire?

"Father?"

"What?"

"If I'd kept a careful eye on both the book and the candlestick, but the book still caught fire, then what did I do wrong?"

"That would indicate a problem with your eyes."

What an ass, I snarled in my mind.

"I'm being serious," I said.

"So am I," my father replied, expressionless, in a matter-of-fact tone of voice.

My sigh was a vent for my swelling anger. I expelled carbon dioxide, and in its place, cool air filled my lungs. I started to feel ever so slightly more composed, and that's when it struck me. *What does he mean by "a problem with your eyes"?*

My two eyeballs alone would not suffice as a method of accurately determining the moods of all the various countries around us or even my own country's agenda.

Well, duh. I'd have to be a clairvoyant, and seers don't exist. That goes for my father as well, however superhuman he may act. At least, I think it applies... Probably.

Therefore, to make up for what he can't see himself, there are people from whom my father receives information—subordinates around the world who gather intel.

If there's a problem with my eyes, then that means...

"So you're saying that there's a problem with the people I choose to delegate duties to?"

Come to mention it, didn't this cross my mind while I was investigating the Lutz abduction plot as well? If I recall correctly, it was the idea that Sir Leonhart's speedy promotion to captain had enabled the royal guard to sniff out the plot more quickly.

One of the underlying reasons why they'd failed to prevent Lutz's abduction in *Hidden World*...had probably been the identity of the game's royal guard captain. Their fatal mistake had been the inability to notice the suspicious behavior of one of the perpetrators—a knight in the royal guard, Nicholas von Buro.

"I suppose that's a passable answer," my father murmured quietly after placing his empty glass on the table. "I'll let you have a bird as your reward."

"What?"

He's lost me. What's he going on about now?

I stared at my father with a blank expression, confused by the sudden change of topic. My inner thoughts were probably written all over my face.

However, my father continued unabashed. "You don't want it?"

"I don't understand what you're saying..." I complained.

"It'll prove useful to you, I expect. Accept my gift, if you know what's best for

you.”

This is making no sense. Is he even trying to hold a conversation?

I forcefully swallowed back the sigh that threatened to escape my lips and then lowered my eyes.

I’m dealing with someone who was born to be king; arrogance is in his nature. If I were to lash out at him without thinking it through, he’d run circles around me, and I’d only succeed in making my life harder.

As I was telling myself that, I heard him mutter to himself.

“I was ready to leave you be, if you’d turned out a little more shoddy.”

“Huh...?”

His voice had been quiet, but I couldn’t let that comment slide. I opened my eyes reflexively, sensing an ominous change in mood. His gaze, like a pair of glass beads, was pointed directly at me.

“What...do you mean by that?” My voice trembled.

“Consider our neighboring countries—which do you think most deserves to be treated with caution?” He didn’t answer my question, but rather, asked one of his own.

I bit down on my lip and glared at him, but he didn’t flinch. In fact, he didn’t seem the least bit affected. I was worked up, but I repeatedly told myself to calm down, and then spoke.

“Lapter.”

There were four countries neighboring Nevel: Vint, Schner, Grundt, and Lapter.

The Kingdom of Vint was a friendly nation that had an alliance with Nevel, so I crossed it off the list.

The Kingdom of Schner, located to our northwest, had entered an alliance with Nevel after the breakout of war with the Kingdom of Skelluts, and we’d maintained amicable diplomatic relations afterward. Even in the hypothetical event that the alliance broke down and we became enemies, Schner would

have to invade Nevel through the treacherous mountain passes which hindered access, and it would be a difficult undertaking.

Nevel had no alliance with the Kingdom of Grundt, but we were tied together with strong trade links, and commerce between our countries was booming. Besides, Grundt was a small country; it had less than half of the landmass of Nevel, so there wasn't much chance of them picking a fight with us.

From my knowledge of the game, I was aware that Lapter was a hostile nation demanding our attention, but even without that information, I'd have come to the same conclusion by process of elimination. Lapter was located to Nevel's northeast, and one-third of its land consisted of frozen wastelands. It would come as no surprise if they were to envy Nevel for its fertile land expanses.

"Then what would you say if Lapter were currying favor with Vint?" he asked.

"Huh?"

Lapter was? With Vint?

That was news to me, and my eyes widened in shock.

"Nobody's..."

Nobody's ever told me that, I almost said, but I stopped myself partway through and shut my mouth. It didn't make much of a difference whether I'd known about it, because my father was privy to a whole world of information that was inaccessible to me. If his information was accurate, then what mattered most was the future I envisaged.

"I'd find that...inauspicious," I said.

In the unlikely event that Lapter, which viewed Nevel as an enemy, joined forces with Vint, we could face an attack on two sides. Simultaneous invasions from the northeast and the west would compel us to divide our armies.

"But the Kingdom of Vint has an alliance with Nevel," I continued. "I can't imagine them betraying us just like that."

"Alliances aren't permanent," my father responded indifferently. "In the long history of the continent, you will find examples of unilateral terminations of alliances before their terms were through. Although you might say that this is

something of a last resort, as that act damages the faith of your neighbors.”

I groaned quietly. It pained me to admit, but he was right. Even in the world of my past life, there’d been occurrences during wartime of military alliances being broken in response to the state of the conflict. However unlikely it was, it was necessary to keep an eye on the situation.

“I’d like to strengthen our relationship with Vint in preparation for the worst-case scenario,” he said. “That being the case, the simplest method is to forge marital ties.”

When I heard that, I grimaced and froze. Cold sweat ran down my spine. I couldn’t play dumb and ask, *Who would be the lucky couple?* Vint’s royal family had two princes and no princesses. In other words, Chris and Johan were out of the picture.

That just left me.

In my mind, I saw letters cascading to form the phrase “strategic marriage,” and my vision shook from the heavy shock of realization. Having been born a princess, I should’ve accounted for this possibility. But I’d turned a blind eye to it my whole life.

Because now...what am I supposed to do with my feelings of love for Sir Leonhart?

If you’d been nothing more than a pretty-faced but mindless drone then I wouldn’t have put much thought into your husband. You wouldn’t have been wed to anyone that mattered one way or the other, and certainly not a foreign royal—a mindless drone in another kingdom’s court would be more likely to sabotage our interests than to serve them. However...you may be somewhat dumb, but you do have a mind of your own.

A second bout of shock hit me when he said that.

Does this mean...if I’d acted “mindless,” and if I hadn’t meddled in the affairs of the kingdom, then my father wouldn’t have wanted to force me into a political marriage? In that case, I might’ve had a little choice in who my partner was. While Sir Leonhart does strike me as someone who matters, if the king had no hopes for my intellect, and no big plans for my marriage, then the chances of

getting with my knight might not have been zero.

It seemed that I had unknowingly tied my own noose.

“You seem displeased,” he remarked.

“Yes.”

“Then make yourself indispensable to me.”

My father narrowed his eyes as he watched my jaw drop. There was no smile on his face, but I got the impression that he was enjoying himself. His sadistic nature was plain to see; he was a beast toying with a small animal. Although, my victim complex might’ve been clouding my judgment.

“The crown prince of Vint turned thirteen this year. Two more years and he’ll be an adult. Prove your worth to me before then,” my father stated with utmost delight.

Fuck you, father, I raged in my mind.

The Reincarnated Princess in a Blind Fury

“He’s the real idiot!!!”

I lifted my pillow above my head and chucked it at the bed’s headboard as hard as I could. That wasn’t enough to quell my temper, so when the pillow bounced back at me, I buried my fist into it with all my strength.

“Oh, you want me to prove my worth to you, do you...?! Who does he think he is?!”

I pummeled the pillow, blow after blow, leaving a miserable dent in it, until it was a few strikes away from tearing and erupting and sending a flurry of feathers all over the room.

I didn’t care. I was too angry for that.

It felt like I was going crazy. I needed to let my rage out on something, or I didn’t know what would happen. The modicum of good sense that hadn’t yet deserted me was keeping my voice hushed, but if I could’ve had my way, I’d have stampeded through the palace screaming out loud.

Aaargh, I can’t stand him! He makes me so angry!!!

Clutching the pillow to my chest, I rolled over and over on top of the bed in my room.

If anyone had witnessed the spectacle, they’d have probably skipped past calling for a doctor—an exorcist might’ve been more appropriate. But nobody was watching, so I carried on.

Klaus was standing guard on the other side of my bedroom door, so perhaps he could hear me, but I no longer cared. *Screw it all*, I whined in my mind. That was how sulky I was feeling at that moment.

I was in too much shock to recall how I’d found my way back to my own room from my father’s. My catatonic state continued for a while after Klaus had left me by myself, but the emotion that had finally overcome me hadn’t been

sadness or despair—it'd been fury.

You bet it was! The result of my hard work is a marriage that I don't even want?! What a joke! I'd have been better off minding my own business and spectating this whole time. All that effort I put in was for nothing!!!

Sure, I was in this for myself. My determination to change the future was compelled strictly by my desire to ensure a peaceful life. I wasn't motivated by some purehearted wish to bring joy to all mankind.

Even so...I wasn't so self-centered as to wish solely for my happiness. I'd tried my best, in my own way, to make a comfortable future—a place where those dear to me and the people around them could all smile together.

How was I supposed to know that my efforts would put me on the engagement route to a foreign prince that I've never even seen?!

"Screw you, father...!!!"

I summoned all of my strength and struck the pillow. The moment that my fist dug into the fabric, several feathers burst through the seam. I was breathing so hard that my shoulders heaved as I watched the whimsical sight of the feathers fluttering down to the floor.

Other than my labored breaths, the room was silent.

"Ugh, whyyy..."

Now that I had finished throwing my tantrum, I felt the energy drain from me. I flopped down onto the bed, facing the ceiling. A feather swirled back into the air, propelled by the force of my body sinking into the bed, and it landed on my nose. I dislodged it with a puff of air and closed my eyes.

"I feel empty," I murmured. My voice sounded vacant. A feeling of hollowness overcame me as my seething temper began to cool down.

Screaming and storming around my room by myself, then topping it off with a serving of self-loathing... I think I need to be checked for emotional instability. What am I even doing?

Carrying on like this and wallowing in self-pity wouldn't solve any of my problems, but I wanted to throw in the towel for the day. My shoulders ached

with a dull pain, probably due to my meltdown.

I think I'm gonna stay right here and fall asleep, I thought as my consciousness began to drift away.

Just then, I felt the light sensation of something pressing against my brow.

"Hmm?" I slowly raised my heavy eyelids. I tried to discern what the slight weight on my forehead was, but I couldn't see anything. Reluctantly, I attempted to sit upright.

A dark figure stirred by my pillow and meowed. My field of view became entirely occupied by the black cat peering back at me.

"Nero."

When I called the name of my cherished cat, he meowed again.

When did he slink over here? While I was going nuts, he was curled up on the sofa without a care in the world.

Nero was looking down at me, apparently not frightened by my hysteric behavior. In fact, from his marble-like blue eyes, I thought I could even sense exasperation, as though he were saying, *You done yet?*

"Neroooo..." I reached toward him while whining pathetically.

However, Nero dodged my arms when I tried to pull him into a hug, then voiced a curt meow as though to decline my embrace.

Oh, you don't want a hug? That's how it is?

The sad truth was that I could understand—of course he'd be hesitant to accept a hug from a woman who'd been on a rampage until a few moments ago. I gave up on the embrace and decided to observe him instead.

Perhaps Nero detected my surrender because he soon settled near where I laid my head. For a second, I was hopeful that he was going to sleep next to me. Nero, however, embarked on a course of action that took me by surprise.

"Hm? Hold on, Nero?"

He rested his second foreleg on my temple, just as he had with the first. Unperturbed by my distress, my cherished cat began to make himself

comfortable on top of my head.

This can't be happening. Sure, you're not yet fully grown, but you're not as light as you used to be! I felt crushed. Literally, this time.

My head was heating up from the warmth of the cat, and I'd only just managed to cool it down from the potency of my rage. The vibrations from Nero's purring passed through his body directly to me.

I'm delighted that you feel comfortable, but please don't drift off in that position. I'll bet I look pretty silly right now. Really, what am I doing...?

I exhaled a heavy sigh, gazing up at my bed's canopy with half-closed eyes. Although it was a little late for self-reflection, sighing was all that I could do as I recalled my actions from tonight.

I'm supposed to be a character from an otome game, so why is everything I do so pathetic?

"Her heart ablaze with an unrequited love, a princess grows delirious with fury after learning that she's been arranged to have a strategic marriage"—don't think I've heard that plotline before. Crying is what they normally do, right?

I'm pretty sure that I should be sneaking myself over to Sir Leonhart and watching him from behind a pillar. Then when I got discovered, I'd say, "Oh, it's nothing," with a nice stoic laugh. At the very least, I shouldn't be swinging pillows around while screaming and raving. That creeps people out. Hell, I'm creeped out, and I'm me!

I guess I'm not made of the right stuff to be an otome game heroine. In that case, my only option is to use what power I can to fight back.

I clasped my hands together above my stomach and took a deep breath, then shut my eyes and concentrated on my thoughts.

My father had told me to demonstrate my worth. That meant that I had to accomplish something in the next two years before the crown prince of Vint came of age. I didn't have a clear idea of what that accomplishment should be, specifically. My first trial would be whether I could come to a decision and make a start.

The prospect was dizzyingly absurd. *Setting such a devilish task for a princess as young as me...? My monster of a father has really outdone himself.*

For better or worse though, I already possessed two objectives.

The first was undertaking countermeasures against the plague that would likely cause a pandemic in the future. Unlike in the game, the present circumstances indicated a good chance that this plague would affect the Kingdom of Vint rather than Nevel. If I could secure a treatment, Vint would owe Nevel a large debt.

The second objective was twofold: we needed to locate the stone that sealed the demon lord, and then, we'd have to store it away beneath strict security. For Nevel's sake, and for the sake of world peace, it would be too dangerous to leave the stone unguarded, as that would carry the perpetual risk of the demon lord's revival occurring with no warning.

Both objectives were of maximum difficulty, and so would be massive accomplishments for me.

That is, if I can follow through, of course.

My father wasn't so laid-back as to give me partial credit for methods or insight. Failing to bring my plans to fruition would be tantamount to having done nothing at all. *Results are everything*, he'd say without raising an eyebrow.

"Do I have it in me?" I mumbled. My voice sounded horribly feeble. My quiet utterance was carried away by the night breeze, unheard by anyone.

Turmoil for the Reincarnated Princess

“Your Highness? Is something the matter?”

A jolt shook the carriage, coinciding with a spectacular bang. One of the wheels must have run over a rock. The large tremor brought me back to reality.

In front of me, Sir Leonhart’s face was clouded with concern. He was probably worried about my distracted behavior.

“I’m...all right.” My voice came out sounding robotic. Understanding of my present situation registered in my dazed brain, and my cheeks began to flush.

What could be worse? I’ve given him an extended viewing of my range of silly faces. Not only that, but I’ve also been ignoring him this whole time even though he’s so important to me.

“Sorry,” I hurriedly apologized, feeling flooded with guilt and embarrassment.

However, he didn’t perk up. Sir Leonhart was staring at me with his brows deeply furrowed and his lips pursed. I cast my head down to escape his gaze, but I could still feel it piercing me.

An awkward silence befell the carriage.

What am I playing at? The whole reason I acted spoiled and asked Sir Leonhart to be my guard on the trip to Lord Julius’s mansion was because I wanted to talk to him.

Feeling ashamed of myself, my head sank even lower, and then a large hand entered my field of view.

“Gah!”

I instinctively recoiled. I didn’t think that he would hit me or anything violent like that—I was just surprised. My flinch had merely been a conditional reflex.

But he couldn’t know that without my telling him, so his hand froze in midair. When I lifted my head, my eyes met Sir Leonhart’s. He was wearing a troubled frown.

I've done it again...!!! I don't know why he was reaching his hand out toward me, but that doesn't change the fact that I just shunned him.

In my defense, I wanted to say, *That's not what I meant! You just caught me off guard*, but I had trouble getting the words out.

He observed me falling silent and slowly asked, "Princess, would it be all right to touch you?"

Touch? Touch what? My discomposure dampened my cognitive functions.

"Uhh, y-y-you m-may." I gave my assent through terrible stutters, and Sir Leonhart's hand scooped up my bangs.

His large palm brushed against my forehead, gently so as not to frighten me. In that moment, my entire body stopped moving, as though frozen in ice. At the sensation of his firm palm, all of my awareness dispersed, and every thought came to a halt.

I was breathless. Sir Leonhart, on the other hand, appeared to be not the least bit disconcerted, judging from his countenance. A concerned frown could be seen on his manly, attractive features which were so close to me, but his brow unfurrowed after a few seconds. He let out a small sigh of relief, and his hand parted from my forehead.

"You don't have a fever," he said. His eyes would often give off a stern impression, but at the moment, they looked soft and kind. He smiled gently at me from just a few inches away, tugging at the wires in my brain until they were close to shorting out.

My cheeks felt even hotter than before. Though my brain seemed completely out of order, my heart was working overtime and pumping restlessly. The sound of my heartbeat was deafening.

"I, uhh... Right," I squeaked.

"I don't see any cuts or scrapes, so you're fine in that regard?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And you feel well?"

"Yes."

“So you have something on your mind?”

“Yes... Ah!” I confirmed his suspicions without properly thinking through my response.

I’d been counting prime numbers in my head to slow my beating heart, but then I’d fallen for a trick too simple to even be called a leading question. What’s worse, I’d realized my mistake and had let my reaction show on my face.

I shot a nervous glance at Sir Leonhart, and found that he was pointing a sweet, oh-so-pretty grin my way. His smile was a different kind from before, which let me know that I couldn’t weasel my way out of this.

“Keeping your worries to yourself is a bad habit of yours, and you need to fix it,” he said, more directly than usual. “Perhaps you would prefer to ask someone other than me for advice, but if you talk to me, then I may be able to be of some assistance.”

Oh, he’s so cool when he drops the formalities.

I gave a small nod. At the same time, I was entertaining a thought that was inappropriate for the situation, either as a way of denying reality, or perhaps just to be faithful to my instincts.

Putting that aside, where do I start?

I peeked up at him, and a feeling pierced my heart when I saw that he was tilting his head slightly, as though encouraging me to speak. *One attack was plenty, please.*

I averted my eyes a little in order to calm myself down, then began to talk. “I was speaking with my father the other day.”

“You visited His Majesty?” Sir Leonhart’s eyes went round.

“Yes,” I replied. “Well, it was the fourth time, actually.”

“How do I say this? You’re...fearless?” Sir Leonhart muttered. “You pick strange times to be resolute and take the initiative.” He gave a sigh that was equal parts shocked and amazed.

I couldn’t be so optimistic as to interpret his words as a compliment. I wasn’t resolute or full of initiative; I was just thoughtless and rash. I’d spent so long in

the lion's den that my initial fear had evaporated and I'd forgotten all about the lion's claws. As a result, I was the idiot who'd received her own comeuppance.

"The first time, I felt so nervous that I thought I'd throw up. But I became rather accustomed after the second time..."

As I quietly mumbled what was more or less an excuse, Sir Leonhart's expression took on an even more peculiar appearance. It looked like he'd tried and failed to appear stern. He rubbed his chin.

"I'm having trouble deciding whether to be angry at your recklessness, or amazed at your boldness," he remarked.

"It's okay to be mad..." I said.

Amazement would be more likely to screw my head up.

Sir Leonhart smiled wryly after witnessing my despondency. He must've decided that I'd repented for my actions because he continued the conversation without scolding me. "So what happened?"

"The truth is..." Without lifting my head, I began to explain, my voice quiet.

The following is what I told him:

My father had allowed me to view the books relating to the demon lord, and I'd resolved to repeatedly visit his room after failing to make much progress reading the antiquated language used in those texts. At some point, I'd gotten so used to being there that I'd let my guard down and had come close to enraging the king.

Father had called me an idiot to my face, and then, through some strange turn in the conversation, had ended up giving me advice. I'd become invested in the discussion, and as a result of asking and answering questions that I should've just brushed off, I'd ended up catching my father's interest somewhat.

Delivering the explanation in such fine detail was quite the ordeal. I don't think that anyone revels in discussing their own failures...especially in my case, as the repercussions had become unfixable. However, I didn't yet have it in me to tell Sir Leonhart about the strategic marriage.

When I finished my explanation, the carriage fell silent.

I was unable to bear the awkward atmosphere, so I summoned my courage and stole a glance at Sir Leonhart. I found him mimicking *The Thinker* by Auguste Rodin. His expression was grave; his brows were deeply furrowed, and he said nothing.

Oh no, I think he's really lost it with me this time.

"Sir...Leon?" I called his name softly but to no response. Rather than ignoring me, it seemed more like he was concentrating so hard that he hadn't noticed my voice.

I sighed softly. My muscles relaxed now that I'd postponed—if only for a short time—the threat of him learning about my arranged marriage. If anyone was going to scold me, I wanted it to be Sir Leonhart, but I didn't want him to lose faith in me or come to dislike me.

With bated breath, I watched for him to make a move.

However, Sir Leonhart kept perfectly still. His droopy almond eyes were fixed on a point of empty space, and his lips remained tightly sealed. His bangs fluttered in step with the bumps of the carriage, casting shadows on his gorgeous forehead. I noticed that his fingers, perched on the strong curves of his cheeks and chin, were long and bony.

Even though I knew that now wasn't the time, I couldn't stop myself from staring. Usually, I'd be too nervous to stare at him directly. But at the moment, he was looking elsewhere, which allowed me to remain calm and observe him. My eyes lit up with every little discovery I made, like the faint scar that marked one of his earlobes, or the surprising length of his down-turned eyelashes.

Half of me recognized that right now *really* wasn't the time for thoughts like these.

As a bitter battle ensued between my good sense—which urged restraint—and my excited emotions, I found it impossible to look away. While I was entranced by his almond eyes and the long lashes decorating them, his obsidian pupils stirred. Those dark eyes moved slowly until they met my own.

"Princess."

I jumped. “Y-Yes!” I yelped abruptly, my voice squeaking.

Sir Leonhart looked taken aback as he watched my clearly flustered reaction. “Princess?” Sir Leonhart called me again, sounding confused. He’d raised his pitch toward the end as if to ask me indirectly what the matter was, and I lost my tongue, unsure of how to respond.

I wasn’t bold enough to be recklessly honest and confess that he’d entranced me.

“Are you sure that you’re not feeling unwell?” he asked.

“No, I’m fine! I was just...umm, thinking...a little,” I deflected while internally mocking myself. *Yep, just thinking a little...while scrutinizing his face. Good one.* “More importantly, what were you about to tell me, Sir Leon?”

Whether he’d discerned my impure thoughts or not, Sir Leonhart didn’t press the topic any further. “Right,” he murmured quietly, and then stopped. He seemed to be reluctant to speak. *Was I just imagining that?*

He fiddled with his hands, repeatedly bringing them together then pulling them apart above his spread legs.

After some hesitation, Sir Leonhart started talking. “You told me before that you don’t wish to rely on Prince Christoph. Is that still your intention?” As he voiced this, my eyes grew wide.

His question was the same as the one he’d asked before when I’d first informed him that I’d encountered my father. I was certain that my answer had been clear back then.

I most definitely will not go to Chris for advice, because I don’t want to be used by him, and I don’t want to force him to make use of me, I’d responded to Sir Leonhart.

I’d thought that my answer had put an end to this topic, so when he brought it up again, I couldn’t conceal my surprise. “Wh-Why do you ask?” I volleyed the question back to him without giving an answer.

It wasn’t like Sir Leonhart to drag up a topic that had already been dealt with. I didn’t mean to criticize him, but my feelings must have seeped into my tone,

because he frowned, looking a little troubled and at a loss for words.

I felt a rush of worry as I watched him react like that. My heart ached with the thought that he'd judged me incapable of handling this matter myself.

"Is it because I'm not reliable?" My pessimistic feelings rolled off of my tongue.

"That's not it," Sir Leonhart denied immediately, dispelling my doubt. "Given how extraordinary you are, I had predicted that His Majesty would take an interest in you sooner or later. But, I hadn't expected it to be this soon. I was naive in my estimation."

Unlike Chris, I played no part in the running of the kingdom. In other words, I'd had no opportunity to display my capabilities to my father. As such, Sir Leonhart had probably assumed that the king would take longer to become aware of my value.

"And you're saying that you've caught his interest *somewhat*... This is worrying to me as well," he continued. "All would be fine if he'd acknowledged your superior talents and had decided to help nurture your skills... But if he's merely judged that you could prove useful to him, then the situation is dire. This may be unpleasant to hear, but if he feels that there is a use for you, the first thought that springs to mind is marriage."

I gasped, letting out an abnormal sound.

He'd suddenly introduced the exact problem that I was, at that very moment, trying to ignore. I froze in place. My mind wasn't ready to deal with this, and I was unable to respond to the explosive topic that he'd thrown my way.

Sir Leonhart watched me gasp and then furrowed his brows suspiciously. He sank into thought, but only for a few seconds—his perception had inferred the truth of the matter from the look on my face, and his expression grew more and more severe.

"Princess, don't tell me..." Horror and unease filled his hoarse voice.

I lowered my head, wanting to escape, and tightened my grip on my skirt. "I-It won't happen immediately!" My tongue moved on its own. Even I thought that I sounded ridiculous. *Oh, what am I saying?* "I have some leeway—the two years

before Vint's crown prince comes of age!"

"Two years, you say?"

It was impossible not to recoil at his grave tone. I could've sworn I heard a voice ask, "Is that all?" beneath his question, but that might've been my victim complex at work.

The back of my nose grew hot and painful. I bit my lip and persevered, giving myself encouragement. "If I can prove my worth in that time frame, then I..."

Then I might be able to marry the man I love, I almost said. But I stopped. It dawned on me that I was fooling myself.

Suppose that I succeeded in leaving behind an accomplishment. Suppose that I won my father's recognition *and* the right to marry a man of my choice. Even then, the odds that I could be with Sir Leonhart were still almost zero.

Although there was nothing unexpected about Sir Leonhart's reaction, his complete composure while learning about my strategic marriage reminded me—the probability of my first love working out was far, far lower than the probability of me earning my father's recognition.

My head sank further and further, a display of my depression. The carriage fell into a stifling silence.

I gazed at my hands, which were crumpling creases into my skirt, and rubbed my fingertips against my nails. After unconsciously repeating that meaningless motion a few times, I sensed Sir Leonhart move. I raised my head, and our eyes met. He looked serious.

"Again, won't you ask Prince Christoph for assistance, just this once?" he asked.

"No!!!" I denied reflexively, without waiting to fully process what he'd said. "I won't," I insisted.

For just this moment, my humble and cowardly desire to not act selfishly or cause trouble had disappeared.

"I know that you're strong-willed," Sir Leonhart said. His tone of voice had returned to normal, and he spoke as though he were lecturing an obstinate

little princess. “However, Your Highness, your future is at stake.”

“It is! That’s exactly why!!!” I swung my head left and right.

I don’t care if he thinks I’m throwing a hissy fit. Yeah, my future’s at stake! That’s absolutely it! That’s why I can’t back down. Like hell I will!!!

I hardened my gaze.

“This is a crisis, but at the same time, it’s an opportunity that might never come again!”

Once I’d said that, I suddenly had a realization—I finally understood what had caused the restlessness that I’d been unable to shake from inside of my mind.

My father’s arrogant attitude had inflamed my temper, but now that I’d thought about it with a cooler head, I realized that princesses, in general, had virtually no say in their marriages. Therefore, I concluded that I was lucky to have even the slightest chance of being able to refuse my own.

Once I realized that, hope sprang out from behind the challenge that had been forced upon me.

“If I were to ask Chris to cancel the strategic marriage,” I explained, “then my father would lose interest in me. He’d write me off as not being able to achieve anything more.”

I could easily imagine him giving up on me. Not that I would mind too much. My father’s loss of faith would *irritate* me, but it wouldn’t *upset* me.

However...

“If I’m unable to prove my worth, I know that I’ll forever lose my right to marry the man of my choice.”

I had no firm basis for that, but my instincts told me so. I’d even go as far as saying that I was certain: my father had said that if I proved of limited use then he’d marry me off to someone harmless and inconsequential.

I’d thought that the chances of Sir Leonhart suiting those conditions would be nonzero, though very small. But now, I was prepared to declare that the chances *were* zero.

He was a valiant soldier whose name resounded throughout the countries around Nevel. He had it all—handsome features, popularity, and intelligence. Everybody would want to get their hands on a man like that, to link themselves to him. Even if I were to lose my usefulness, Sir Leonhart wouldn't. Would my father really hand over such a ridiculously valuable asset to a flawed, worthless princess like me?

"I need to do this by myself," I muttered, and my voice sounded like a croak. Tears gradually began to well in my eyes.

Sir Leonhart paused and then called out to me softly. "Princess..." His confounded expression looked slightly more youthful than usual.

I'll bet he'd be thrown for a loop if I told him that I also love that look on him, I thought. My face scrunched up, and I felt like I was about to cry. Even if you're out of my grasp, I don't want to give up on you yet.

"I need to try. Otherwise, I won't even be able to tell the person I love...how I feel." I blurted my thoughts out while staring straight into Sir Leonhart's eyes.

On the other side of my gaze, Sir Leonhart's piercing eyes grew as round as saucers. I saw myself reflected in his obsidian pupils, which displayed only pure astonishment. I was breathing heavily, and my face was burning as if I had a fever.

Composure returned to me as suddenly as if I'd been doused with cold water. A moment later, I was overcome by a sense of achievement and a simultaneous feeling of regret.

Did I really just say that to Sir Leonhart? Looking like I am now?

I might as well have just screamed, "I love you!"

I groaned. It was too late to retract the words that I'd let slip out. A part of me clutched at straws and prayed that he hadn't heard me, but the look of shock on Sir Leonhart's face extinguished that possibility. He was staring *right* at me, and I couldn't wrest my eyes from his.

I'd unconsciously placed a hand against my chest and could feel my heart beating quickly enough to burst. The inside of my mouth felt like sandpaper; my nerves had dried it out. I swallowed in order to moisten my throat, and the

resulting noise sounded thunderous.

I watched Sir Leonhart's eyes slowly narrow while despair washed over my mood. Terror crept over me, potent enough to give my entire body chills.

With every fiber of my being, I thought, *I'm scared. I wanna run away.*

For as long as I could remember, I'd never hidden my affection for Sir Leonhart. He most likely knew all about it. But he'd have viewed my feelings as a crush, just the adoration that little girls show adult men, an emotion too shallow to call love, and one that would transition into a memory when the time came.

That assessment was precisely the reason why Sir Leonhart had never spurned my affection. He'd certainly thought that my feelings would disappear on their own someday, so there was no need to reject them.

But just now, I'd shown him that this wasn't a fleeting fever. I'd let the fact slip; my feelings were so deep and burdensome that I was willing to stake my own future on preserving them.

Thanks to that, Sir Leonhart's reaction was as clear as day. He knew that a young princess was about to risk her future on a reckless bet, all for the dim prospect of her first romance...not to mention that *he* was the object of those thoughts.

He'd put an end to my crush.

There was no doubt about that. He'd shut me down with a kindness that would border on cruelty, and would decide that it was something I didn't need. He wouldn't ask for my opinion.

"Lady Rosemary," he called out to me quietly.

This was the first time that he'd called me by my name. However, I wasn't carefree enough to rejoice about that without a second thought; I knew what was coming next.

No.

No. Please, don't.

I shook my head again and again, like a petulant child. Though I felt a surge of

guilt when Sir Leonhart frowned awkwardly, I couldn't back down. Maybe I just didn't know when to give up, but there were some things that I had to stick to.

"I'm—" His shapely lips slowly spelled out the start of his words, about to sound my death knell.

"Stop!!!" I screamed loudly as despair closed in on me.

I practically tumbled out of my seat and latched onto him. He leaned down at once to prop me up, and I covered his mouth with both of my hands. Sir Leonhart looked dumbfounded. His arms were around me, and his mouth was sealed off.

He looked flabbergasted and confused as he watched me shove my fingers against his face. I was in no state of mind to feel embarrassed at the sensation of his lips against my palm. He didn't resist and seemed incapable of prying my hands away.

"You can't say it yet... I don't want you to!" I wrung my voice out once more, looking up at him.

I confess it was unfair of me to plead while sounding tearful. It was an underhanded move, utilizing in full force the fact that I was a young girl. I knew that Sir Leonhart was too kind to swipe away the hand of a child on the verge of crying, but I had to keep going.

"Don't turn me down yet." My voice was trembling. "Please, don't give your answer to me as I am now," I begged, peering into his jet-black eyes.

Sir Leonhart continued to stare down at me in silence, as though he had something he wanted to say. One of his large hands touched mine. He pulled my hands away slowly as if to ease the rigidity of my fingers, which had solidified from anxiety and fear.

Even after he'd removed my hands from his lips, he still said nothing. Without speaking, he picked me up and lowered me gently back onto my seat.

My head sank. He kneeled on the carriage floor without hesitation and placed a hand on my cheek, wiping away a teardrop from the skin beneath my eyes. My tears had been almost held back by surface tension, but it seemed that they'd begun to trickle down.

“Don’t cry.”

I raised my head a little upon hearing the feeble tone in Sir Leonhart’s voice. His fine, manly features were marred by distress, just as his voice was.

“If you cry,” he said, “I won’t know what to do.”

But his kind gesture brought forth more of them; my tear ducts overflowed, and large droplets ran down my cheeks.

“Give me a little more time...” I sobbed, my shoulders heaving. “I don’t want my age to be the reason you reject me. There’s nothing I can do to make myself older. So don’t turn me down, not until I become an adult.” I didn’t think that I’d be able to give up on Sir Leonhart if he rejected me for being a child. “Or until you—”

My words had come to an unnatural stop, and Sir Leonhart gazed at me with concern.

“Princess?”

I needed more courage to say the words perched on the tip of my tongue. What I really wanted was to tie him down with a selfish, one-sided promise, and close my eyes to any other possibility. But I couldn’t do that; I didn’t have it in me to constrict the person I loved and leave him with no way out. It wasn’t because of a sense of justice or morality, but rather, because I couldn’t bear for him to come to resent me.

“Until you...fall in love with someone.” A new wave of tears came flooding out the moment I said that. The thought alone wracked me with a heart-crushing pain. I bit my lips to hold back the wail that threatened to escape.

“Princess.”

I felt the soft touch of his finger against the corner of my eye, and I saw that his intense eyes gleamed with a surprisingly gentle light. His brows were furrowed deeply, creating distinct wrinkles on his forehead.

I love it all. I don’t want to let any of it go to anyone else. I want the faces he makes for me, and the words he says to me...to be treasures that belong to me and me alone.

But I can't. That wouldn't be right.

What good would come from having him stay by my side out of pity? If I tied him down by making him feel sorry for me, it'd just be painful for the both of us; if I can't get him to feel the same way about me, then I need to let him go.

I can get him to delay his decision for a little while, and during that time, I'll work and struggle and toil away. However, if my efforts don't work out, all I can do is pray for his happiness.

"When you do, I'll let you turn me down," I said, trying to sound haughty. I twisted the corners of my lips while praying that my smile seemed genuine.

There was silence. Sir Leonhart made no reply. The only sound inside the carriage was the turning of the wheels. However, that quietness didn't feel smothering.

He exhaled a small sigh with his eyes still pointed at me, then squinted, as though he were looking at the sun. His features softened. "You really are strong," he said under his breath.

I tilted my head, unsure of what he meant.

Just what part of me is strong? I'm a child who can't hold back her tears the moment she thinks you might turn her down.

Sir Leonhart smiled at me when he noticed my confusion. His shoulders slumped, and his expression looked so gentle. My breath stopped. I was entranced.

At the same time, the final tear that had welled in my eyes spilled over. The drop fell and passed over the contours of my face. Sir Leonhart used his finger to wipe it away, and then he lifted his knees from the carriage floor and returned to his seat, sinking down heavily. I watched him acting crudely and felt my heart leap. He usually behaved like a knight, every action smooth and graceful.

I must have a thing for manly men. My thoughts began to wander off track.

Sir Leonhart clasped his hands above the spacious gap between his legs and leaned forward. He dispensed with his smile and caught me in his jet-black

pupils.

“Princess,” he called out to me, sounding collected, causing me to jump.

What am I gonna do if he says he’s already in love with someone?

“Do you mind if I tell you about myself?” he started, in a gentle tone to dispel my anxiousness.

“About you?” I asked, taken aback.

“Yes,” Sir Leonhart confirmed. His pretty lips curved gently upward and his imposing eyebrows arched downward, altogether forming a troubled smile on his rugged, handsome features. “To be honest, I never thought that I’d tell you this. It’s not the sort of tale to be telling princesses, and it doesn’t paint me in a good light either. I doubt you’ll think the same way about me after I’ve told you.”

He wore a self-deprecating smile.

I wanted to reject that notion, but in reality, I knew nothing about Sir Leonhart. He wouldn’t believe me if I disagreed before hearing what he had to say. The idea didn’t sit right with me for another reason as well—if I refused, it would be as if I were pretending that a part of him didn’t exist.

So I said nothing and waited for him to continue.

“I want to always be honest with you.”

I thought that my heart had stopped. His sudden declaration froze me solid.

I feel like he just said something crazy.

Heat steadily spread across my face. Embarrassment and a surge of joy overcame me, and I felt giddy enough to run around while screaming out loud. My heart had not, in fact, stopped; it was fit and healthy and beating fast enough to be heard.

However, the significance of his words appeared to be lost on Sir Leonhart. Still looking composed, he gazed at me, puzzled at my unusual reaction. I was the only one excited, and nothing could’ve been more embarrassing. Even so, I couldn’t keep the grin from appearing on my face.

He wants to always be honest with me, he said. And he's letting me in on something that he wanted to keep to himself when he could've found any excuse to put me off.

I felt like he'd permitted me to enter his world, and I couldn't contain my joy.

"I'm happy that you're telling me, Sir Leon." After revealing my honest opinion, I straightened my facial expression. "Will you let me hear it?" I asked.

Sir Leonhart nodded. "As you know, I'm still single, even as old as I am. But that fact isn't the result of some firm conviction on my part."

My jaw dropped and my eyelids flew open and shut several times. "It isn't?" I asked.

The first shocking revelation had come early.

Sir Leonhart's bachelorhood was extremely convenient for me personally, but naturally, I'd found it strange. He possessed robust good looks and a well-proportioned build. His skill with a sword was fabled to be the best in all of Nevel, and he held the high post of captain of the royal guard. His personality was great, and he inspired the trust of his subordinates. He hailed from a family of nobles, as the "von" in his name suggested. His father was Count Orsein, and he was descended from the old and prestigious Orsein family.

Nobody could leave an item as ridiculously excellent as that on the shelf. It just wouldn't happen. As a matter of fact, there was no end to the number of noble ladies who had their eyes on him. And yet, he'd persistently remained single.

I'd always assumed that he had some conviction underlying that choice. For example, perhaps he hadn't wanted to leave behind a grieving widow, since he could lose his life any day in his line of work. Or maybe he hadn't wanted to increase the number of people he'd have to protect.

"I'm not a man of high moral standing. In my younger days, I was quite the troublemaker." His wry smile deepened, and he scratched at his cheek with a finger as if he were embarrassed. He'd used a roundabout expression, maybe out of consideration for my young age, but I assumed that he meant he'd played the field.

Perhaps, as a girl who wasn't yet an adult, I ought to have been shocked. However, the realization didn't particularly shake me. I did have my hopes, but I hadn't expected him to be a saint.

Well, he's handsome, so of course women would flock to him. That incredibly underwhelming impression was all that I was left with. His past was just that—*past*. I hadn't fallen in love with the man in his wild days, but I'd fallen for the current Sir Leonhart, who'd already gone through that period and settled down.

"Right," I said.

Sir Leonhart looked a little surprised at my understated reaction. Perhaps my choice of replies wasn't correct for a girl my age, or a girl in love with him—but on the inside, I *was* in my twenties. I wasn't so purehearted as to hyperventilate and protest, *You'd never do such a thing!*

For a while, Sir Leonhart peered at me in silence with great interest, but he soon returned to telling his story. Maybe he'd deemed that I hadn't understood his implication... Hopefully, that was the case.

"I was engaged once, after I'd settled down a little. She was modest and graceful, and too perfect to be wasted on the likes of me."

Okay, I take back what I said. It's in the past, but that's still pretty tough to listen to.

It hadn't hit home when I'd only had a vague impression of women being with him, but now, upon learning of this one in detail, my emotions flew into turmoil. As my mental image of the beautiful woman standing beside Sir Leonhart grew more detailed, my heart suffered throbs of pain.

I bet they were perfect for each other, I thought, torturing myself.

But the words that Sir Leonhart said next, while his head sank slightly, brought my attention back. "She was mild mannered, accepting, and she'd never complain about anything. And, unless I'm fooling myself, she loved me... But I wasn't able to reciprocate her feelings."

"Huh?"

"I'd been treating her well, or so I'd thought. But she cried and told me that

she couldn't bear it. She said that the more she got to know me, the more she was forced to realize the vast difference in the scale of our affection for one other. That hurt her."

I couldn't say anything. His expression didn't look out of the ordinary, other than the wry smile that he was wearing. However, his voice was as pained as someone repenting their sins. I didn't know what I could say back to him.

"It was then that I finally realized that I'd never truly loved someone with all of my heart. I must be lacking something important that other people have."

He'd dropped that like it was nothing, but it felt serious to me.

"I tried to love her," he continued. "But while I found her charming, I never could. Even when I pictured her falling for another man and leaving me, my heart didn't feel broken at all. If anything, I felt relieved, like a heavy burden had been lifted from me... I have to say, I sicken even myself," he remarked scornfully.

I could only chew my lip, still at a loss for what to say.

"She lost hope in me and joined a convent. I didn't stop her. Not that I'd ever had the right to."

"Sir Leon..."

"Since then, I've received numerous marriage proposals, but I've rejected them all. I'd only be making someone else sad." After a pause, he brought his story to an end. "That's all I have to say."

Now that he was done speaking, he watched me with a calm look on his face. He didn't awkwardly avert his eyes or make any other guilt-ridden gesture, but simply wore a look of resignation and asked softly, "Has your impression of me soured?"

I silently shook my head in response to his question.

Sir Leonhart might have told me about his past to make me give up on him, so that I wouldn't fruitlessly waste my time on a romance that wouldn't work, or so that I wouldn't end up crying in the future.

Certainly, after hearing his story, the prospect of my first love working out

now appeared even dimmer than before. I doubted that I could succeed where the pretty, older girls and graceful, reserved women had failed.

But that didn't mean that I'd be able to just give up. If my love was so small that I could throw my hands up and walk away just like that, then I wouldn't be feeling the way that I was. Even if Sir Leonhart wasn't capable of giving his wholehearted affection to other people, that was no good reason for me to bring my love to an end. My love belonged to me—only I had the right to decide whether I ended it or nurtured it.

"Sir Leon, can I ask you just one question?"

"Yes?"

"Am I burdening you?" I asked quietly.

This was the only thing that I wanted to find out after hearing his story.

Staying in love was up to me, but I didn't want that choice to upset the man I loved. As obstinate as I was, even *I'd* back down if he told me to my face that I was a bother.

"Of course not!" Sir Leonhart denied without delay, revealing my fear to have been unfounded.

I sighed with relief after hearing the rough, hurried tone of his voice. "In that case, I don't want to give up on you," I declared.

His almond eyes grew round in a display of amazement.

Yeah, I can understand your surprise, I thought, as though it had nothing to do with me. *I must have it in for myself, saying 'I won't give up' to the person who's just told me that he's incapable of falling in love. Maybe I am just love-drunk. Also, a part of me has been duped into believing that I might actually be able to make him come around.*

Either way, it's nothing to be proud of.

The thought amused me. I laughed while staring at Sir Leonhart's stunned reaction.

"Please, let me continue to love you."

Until the day that you find someone who means something to you. Until the day that I can put my feelings behind me. Please, don't take this away from me.

After I expressed a wish that was an honest reflection of my heart, Sir Leonhart went still for a while, and then let out a deep sigh. "I really am no match for you," he whispered, a smile on his face and a tear in his eye.

An Incident Befalls the Reincarnated Princess

In the end, I canceled my visit to the Eigers. I couldn't stand to go out anywhere with my puffy, bloodshot eyes because everyone would've known that I'd been crying. So instead, we turned around and headed home. Sir Leonhart provided me with a damp cloth, and I applied it to my face in order to reduce the swelling around my eyes.

However, just as we neared the palace, our party came to a sudden halt. The horses neighed, and the carriage shook ferociously. My body slid off the seat, and simultaneously, the cloth that covered my eyes fell away.

"Huh?" I blurted, sounding stunned. I had no idea what'd just happened.

The world was suddenly brighter. I was now gazing at the carriage's ceiling, and Sir Leonhart was reaching his hand toward me with a frantic look on his face.

"Lady Rosemary!!!" he called out in alarm before taking me into his arms. His hands were gripping my shoulders tightly, and it hurt a little. Although I did find it strange that a gentleman like Sir Leonhart would apply so much pressure, I soon settled into his embrace.

"Are you hurt?" he asked with a grave look in his eyes.

"N-No, I'm not..." I replied, despite my confusion.

How could I be? You caught me.

At first, I assumed that he was just following procedure, but then he inspected every inch of my body for injuries. Finding none, he sighed with relief. He scooped me up as gently as one would handle fine china and then lightly placed me back onto my seat.

"I'll go and check what's happening outside. Please wait here." After putting on a serious expression, Sir Leonhart rested his dominant hand on his sword's hilt and his other hand on the door. As I watched him from behind, I experienced a sense of déjà vu.

Last time, it was Michael protecting a cat. I wonder what's holding us up this time?

I quieted my breathing, while nerves and anxiety stiffened my facial muscles. Then I pricked up my ears to gather information from outside, and I noticed a faint voice. My eyes grew large; I'd heard that voice before—as had Sir Leonhart, it seemed. The tension in the air eased.

When he opened the door, I found exactly the person that I'd imagined would be there.

"S-S-Sorry!!! I-I'm not trying to inconvenience you, doing the same thing over and over... I really am so sorry."

The moment our eyes met, I felt flooded with relief.

It was the same scene as a few days prior—Michael was standing there, bowing his head with great force. However, this time, he didn't appear to be holding a cat.

"Are you all right?" I asked, climbing out of the carriage. "Were you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine," Michael answered, but his face was pallid. That said, he didn't seem to be hiding an injury from us either.

So, what was going on?

He was pale-faced and his eyes were flitting around skittishly. Michael was by no means a conversationalist, but I felt that there was another reason for his unsettled behavior.

I decided not to beat around the bush. "Did something happen?"

Michael's head had been drooping, but it shot up when he heard my question.

"H-How..." *How did you know?* His expression spoke more clearly than his stuttered words.

"Because you're acting rather distressed," I explained. "Were you on your way somewhere?"

Michael parted his lips to speak, but then bit down on them. He looked away,

appearing uncertain, and his palms gripped and crumpled his black vestments. “Kai—uh, one of the kids from the orphanage—hasn’t come home,” Michael whispered after hesitating for a while.

“How long has he been gone?” I asked.

“He went to collect firewood with three other kids before noon. But he apparently got separated from the others at some point...”

“Before noon,” I repeated.

I looked to the west and saw that the sun was already beginning to set on the horizon.

“The orphans know this forest better than I do,” Michael explained, “so I can’t imagine him getting lost. And collecting firewood is a chore they do almost every day.”

“Right...” I murmured.

If it’s not likely that Kai’s gotten himself lost, then is he injured? What if he can’t walk?

I shot a look at Sir Leonhart. He nodded at once, understanding what I wanted to convey. Now that I had Sir Leonhart’s acknowledgment, I turned to face Michael again.

“Michael, let us help you search for him.”

“Huh?” My proposal was apparently stupefying. After a few seconds, Michael grew flustered and shook his head, perhaps having only just registered the meaning of my words. “Th-That’s not what I meant! I wasn’t trying to guilt you into helping!”

“Please,” I implored, “it’s clear to me that you aren’t trying to trick us.”

“Oh, er, right... But, th-there’s no need. I’m on my way to help with the search myself.”

“The more on the lookout the better. Besides, the sun will set soon. We need to find him before it gets dark.”

“Princess...” This appeared to be a dilemma for Michael. It seemed that he

didn't want to bother us, but his concern for the child won out in the end. After some indecision, he turned to us and bowed his head.

"Please, help me look for him."

Before entering the forest to find the missing child, we headed to the orphanage, and I was dropped off there. For a moment, I'd thought that I might be able to help with the search, but it was to no avail. After all, I was *technically* a trueborn princess, a fact that often slipped my mind due to my all-too-embarrassing inner nature. Joining a search of the woods would be too much for a pampered girl who'd barely ever ventured outside of the palace. I'd likely end up getting lost myself and making everyone else's job harder. I was to wait patiently in the orphanage with a knight to guard me until Sir Leonhart and the others returned.

The orphanage was a small brickwork building, a simple structure with walls made from stacked burned bricks alongside wooden beams and a wooden roof. Instead of glass windows, there were shutters fitted onto the walls that could open and close. The floor was hardened dirt.

I was taken into a room which was furnished with only a large wooden table and some chairs. Perhaps this spot was usually designated for meals.

The chair creaked loudly when I sat, though I'd lowered myself down gently. I stood halfway up, taking my weight off the seat out of fear that I might've broken it, but the chair was luckily still intact. I exhaled a relieved sigh.

The guard knight grimaced as he watched me gingerly rest myself back onto the seat. "Your Highness...wouldn't it be better to wait in the carriage?" he asked.

I'd simply been apprehensive about damaging furniture that didn't belong to me, but it might have appeared differently to him.

"Places like this must surely be unsavory to one as noble as yourself," he added.

"Stop that," I ordered softly, and the youthful guard looked shocked. "We're the ones who've visited unannounced, so don't you think that remarks like that

are unacceptably bad-mannered?”

“But—”

I stared directly at the knight who was still protesting, then gestured with my eyes that no further questions would be necessary. He lowered his head with a look of unease.

After some silence, he apologized quietly. “Forgive me.”

It seemed that I’d completely awed the guard, who was slightly younger than Klaus, and he made no further protest. Though I believed what I’d said, perhaps I could’ve phrased it better.

I examined my surroundings to distract myself amid the awkward silence. Here and there were signs that children made frequent use of this room: violets arranged in a little glass cup, scribblings on the edges of the table, and pebbles that had been stuffed inside a hole in the wall.

While I was glancing around the room, I noticed that I was being watched. Three small heads were poking out from behind the doorway. They appeared to be observing me, and their bodies were half-hidden behind the wall. I smiled toward the three pairs of eyes, all of which were staring at me with fascination.

“Hello there,” I said.

My greeting must’ve frightened them. The three children jumped up and darted behind the wall to conceal themselves.

Maybe I should’ve acted differently, I thought with a wry smile, but then the small heads crept past the doorway once again.

Looks like they’re cautious, but too curious to let that stop them.

“H-Hello!” I tried again, breaking into a smile at their adorable behavior. “How about you come over here so that we can talk?” I suggested lightly, keeping my smile in place so as not to scare them.

I beckoned to the children, and they shared looks between them. After a moment, they blushed and elbowed one another, until at last they approached in a line, led by what seemed to be the eldest among them.

The oldest girl introduced herself. “Umm, my name’s Hannah.” She was still

holding her head low, and her cheeks were flushed.

She looked about ten years old. Her eyes were a green-tinged gray, and her bright-red hair was braided into pigtails. She was slender and fair-skinned, with freckles on her rosy cheeks. In short, she was an adorable child who reminded me of *Anne of Green Gables*.

“This is Lotte, and this is Udo,” Hannah said.

A girl who seemed to be around five years old looked up at me with a bright beaming smile. This was apparently Lotte. Her chestnut-colored hair was cut at shoulder length, and her large eyes of the same color were framed by long eyelashes. Her facial features were well-proportioned, and I expected that she’d be quite the beauty when she grew up.

The boy called Udo must’ve been shy, as he was clinging to Hannah and hiding behind her. He seemed to be a sensitive boy. His hair was gray-colored and straight, and he had green eyes.

Lotte was full of energy, while Udo was more reserved. Though they were of similar age, their dispositions seemed worlds apart.

“My name is Rosemary. I’ll be waiting here for a little while.”

Lotte’s eyes lit up after I’d introduced myself. She jumped out from behind Hannah and raced toward me. Her tiny hands tugged at the hem of my skirt.

“A princess!” she exclaimed.

“Hm?”

“A sparkly and soft princess!”

The thing sparkling here isn’t me, Lotte—it’s your eyes!

Lotte excitedly chanted, “princess, princess,” with red cheeks, leaving me unsure of how to react.

Well yeah, I am technically a princess by birth, but I’m anything but that on the inside. Her girlish fantasy might come crashing down if she spends too long with an uninspiring princess like me.

“Stop that, Lotte!” Hannah grabbed the little girl’s collar and hurriedly peeled

her off of me. "You mustn't be rude to the princess!"

"I *wasn't*! I just called her a princess because she *is* one." Lotte puffed out her chubby cheeks.

"Well, yeah," Hannah conceded, "but that's rude!"

Lotte huffed, turning her face away from Hannah. "Don't get it."

"Oh, for goodness' sake!" Hannah exclaimed in frustration.

I bet you're always having to run around after her. The thought brought a sympathetic smile to my lips.

"Um, you don't really have to act any differently around me..." I said.

"B-But..." Hannah's eyes landed on the guard to my rear.

However, the knight looked away uncomfortably and said nothing. My earlier exchange with him must've still been on his mind.

Sorry, young man, but to be honest, you're doing me a big favor by keeping your mouth shut, I thought.

"There's nobody here to tell you off at the moment," I declared with a smile. Hannah's expression relaxed, and Lotte's beaming smile was dazzling.

The friendly girl called Lotte snuggled up to my knees like a kitten. "You smell lovely, Princess."

"Do I?"

"Yeah! C'mere, Udo. She's a kind princess so she won't shout at us." Lotte reached out a hand and beckoned to him, but Udo's cheeks blushed scarlet and he dithered behind.

"Uh, I, ummm..." His eyes darted around the room nervously, and in the end, he took refuge behind Hannah.

"Sorry about him," Hannah said with an awkward smile while stroking Udo's hair. "He's shy."

"Don't worry," I replied. "My younger brother's shy as well, so it brings back fond memories."

“Your brother... So, a prince?” Hannah asked.

“That’s right.” I smiled at her while remembering my younger brother, Johan.

Soon, it would mark three years since Johan had left to study in a neighboring country. He was managing all right, judging by the regular letters I’d received. My brother had changed so much from the days when he’d been so shy that he would hide behind me all day long. Occasionally, rumors about him would find their way to me, but every one I’d heard had been positive. Nevel’s second prince was celebrated as a splendid boy, one who was smart and sociable.

I was excited about seeing him again, but a little frightened as well. To be honest, my feelings were complicated.

“Round here, the girls are tough and the boys are shy, mostly,” Hannah explained. “Kai’s really bashful too, and a scaredy-cat... I wonder if he’s crying right now,” Hannah mumbled as if to herself. Her face darkened, and she glanced outside the window.

I assumed that Kai was the child who’d gone missing. Thinking back, I seemed to recall Michael calling him by that name as well.

“Wonder where he’s gotten to?” Lotte said quietly as she laid her cheek on my thigh. She looked sullen, as though Hannah’s anxiety had infected her.

I wanted to reassure them, but I couldn’t conjure anything thoughtful to say. After I gently stroked her soft hair, she buried her face in my lap. Everyone stopped talking, and silence permeated throughout the room.

That stillness was disturbed by a noise from outside.

I gasped as the clamorous sound of a struggle paralyzed me. The disturbing ruckus wasn’t a single occurrence; it repeated over and over. Lotte and I instinctively huddled together.

“Is there anybody else here?” I asked, my voice hushed.

Hannah smiled as if to reassure me. “Other than us, the only ones who’ve stayed behind are two boys. They’re probably fighting again.”

I relaxed upon hearing the vexed tone in Hannah’s voice.

“Your Highness, I’ll go and inspect what’s happening,” my guard volunteered.

Hannah raised her hand timidly in response to the knight's proposal. "I'll go too. If they *are* having a fight, I'll calm them down."

My guard and Hannah walked out of the doorway, leaving behind Udo, who stood inertly in the center of the room.

I called out, causing his tiny shoulders to flinch. "Udo, come talk with us over here while we wait for Hannah to return."

The young boy went silent, eyes teary. His gaze flitted between me and the door. However, once he realized that he couldn't go to Hannah for help since she wasn't back just yet, he began to shuffle toward me.

"C'mon, Udo! Hurry up!" Lotte grabbed Udo's hand and pulled him over, probably fed up with his slow pace.

"Huh?" Udo cried. As a result of Lotte's tugging, Udo found himself hugging onto my lap, and his downcast eyes flew wide open. After taking a good look at my face, his cheeks turned bright red.

"I, ohh." He froze as an odd noise escaped his throat, and the sight was reminiscent of Michael. I observed his panicked reaction while resisting the urge to pat his little head.

However, the very next moment, a yell shattered the tranquil atmosphere.

"Identify yourselves!!!" The agitated cry of the knight was joined by the thunder of clashing swords.

I instinctively rose to my feet and stood protectively in front of the children.

What followed was a girl's frightened scream, several footsteps, and then the crash of something breaking. The tumult told me that the situation was severe. I paled and tensed up. Though I wanted to check what was happening out there, my body wouldn't budge.

"Yeep!!!" Udo cried.

"Is there a fight...?" Lotte asked.

I was petrified with terror, but the warmth of those tiny hands clinging to me brought me back to my senses. As I felt the children's body temperature through my clothes, my fear subsided.

“It’s all right,” I said, without a good idea of *what* I was claiming to be “all right.”

If I let myself get worried, the kids will get anxious too.

“It’s okay, so be calm.” I repeated the sentiment, as though I were trying to convince myself. *Inhale, slow exhale.* I managed to regain my composure somewhat by repeating that process a few times.

I don’t know what’s going on outside of this room right now, but if we’re in danger, then I need to at least get these kids outta here.

Having settled on that course of action, I frantically scanned my surroundings.

Only one way in and out. It’d be a challenge to squeeze through that narrow window, but maybe a small child could fit through...

I ripped open the shutters and gave the area beyond the window a quick examination. Outside, there was nobody to be seen.

“Lotte, Udo,” I called, my voice hushed. I picked Lotte up first.

“Prin...cess?” Lotte’s large eyes welled with tears, and she looked at me pleadingly.

Udo gripped my skirt, looking worried.

“I have a job for you two.” I looked at them both in turn, exhorting my stiff facial muscles to form a grin.

“A job...?” Udo said, confused.

I turned my smile to him and nodded. “Could you go and fetch Michael or my knight for me?”

“Fetch them?” Udo repeated my words.

“Are you gonna get Michael to tell off the naughty boys?” Lotte asked. My eyes crinkled at her cute phrasing. It eased my sense of tension, if just a little.

“That’s right. So I want you to go get him in secret. You mustn’t let the children who’re fighting see you... Can you do that?”

Lotte bit down hard on her plump lips. “Yeah.” She nodded and wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. She wriggled through the

narrow window and then extended her arm toward Udo from the outside.

“Let’s go, Udo.”

“Huh?” Udo blurted, confused.

“We’re gonna go get Michael, ’kay?” Lotte called out to Udo once more.

I lifted Udo through the window. Though I felt guilty for ignoring his distress, there wasn’t enough time for him to tarry.

“Please,” I said again, making eye contact with him, and he nodded half-heartedly.

I watched the two of them sprint away, hand in hand, until they were out of sight. Their figures looked so tiny as they vanished into the distance that I felt a surge of worry.

Please, don’t let there be anyone dangerous out there.

Very shortly after that, the door flew open with a tremendous bang. I gasped and spun around as a man stepped into the room.

“There’s another one here,” he called.

The short-statured hunchbacked man shifted the dark brown cloth that he’d wound around his head and then looked at me. Deep wrinkles were etched into the skin around his eyes, which peeked through the cloth. I estimated that he was older than fifty.

In his right hand, he was holding a knife with a curved blade, which looked very similar to a kukri. It was covered with rust and scratches and, to my spine-chilling horror, occasional flecks of something dark red. The whites of his eyes were discolored, and they opened wide when he saw me.

“Ooh.” The man ogled me from head to toe. I winced at his crass gaze, but he whistled delightedly. “A real fine one was holing up in this room. Get in here, boys!” he shouted through the doorway, and three more men piled in.

“Would ya look at that!” cheered a large-framed man who was carrying a boy on each shoulder as though they were bags of rice. He laid them on the floor while staring at me with great interest.

The boys were gagged and bound with rope. Their eyes were closed, and they

might've been unconscious.

A thin man was restraining Hannah, and he looked back and forth between us. "I thought *this* girl was a looker, but she don't even compare..."

"Aaah!" Hannah let out a fraught scream when his face drew close to hers. She slammed her eyes shut, and glistening tears welled at the corners of her lids.

"Well, it's a difference in class, ain't it," the large man said. "That dress of hers is something fancy. Could be she's a noble girl paying a sympathy visit to the orphanage."

"So the handsome one we laid flat outside would be the little lady's guard, then?" the thin man said.

Laid flat. I felt the slightest bit of relief upon hearing that phrase. It seemed that they hadn't killed the knight who'd gone to inspect the noise.

"You come for a visit and have a run-in with kidnappers... Not your lucky day, little lady," one of them sneered at me.

The fact that he'd used the word "kidnappers" was more interesting to me than his threat. I surmised that we'd been apprehended by a group of criminals engaged in human trafficking.

Could the kid who went missing have been abducted by these people as well? I wondered. On the day when we'd first met Michael, I recalled that Sir Leonhart had mentioned reports of criminals around this area. I'd interpreted that as a white lie he'd told to encourage Michael to join us, but I'd never imagined that it was true.

"We'll fetch a pretty price from the brothels for a beaut like this," one of the men remarked.

"Hang on a tic," another argued. "Why sell her when we can go straight to her parents? Strike a deal with 'em."

"Nah, there's more money in selling her off to a rich old man," a third kidnapper insisted.

The men had begun to quibble about whether to put me up for sale or to

demand ransom money from my parents. My mind became almost overwhelmed—the subject of their cheerful exchange was about how best to turn a profit using me as leverage. The word “brothel” in particular spurred the biggest reaction from me, and I began to tremble. As someone who’d not had a boyfriend, even over the course of two lifetimes, I was out of my depth.

“Too scared to say anything, eh, little lady?” The big man smirked vulgarly at me as I paled and stood there speechless. He leered at me like a beast toying with its prey, then stepped toward me.

The man terrified me as he approached, knocking over a chair between us and kicking the table out of the way. My instincts urged me to flee at once, to retreat to the corner of the room, and I barely managed to withstand that impulse. The window was behind me, so if I were to move, the men might spot the children as they returned.

I had to prevent these men from seeing outside.

So, I straightened my posture and stamped my foot on the ground, even though I was barely able to keep my legs from shaking. I slapped away the gnarly hand that had reached toward me, and the sound resounded throughout the room.

The kidnapper looked surprised. He obviously hadn’t anticipated my reaction, and he stumbled to a stop.

“You insolent wretch!” I shouted, tucking in my jaw and glaring coldly at the men.

I heard a gasp as the man retreated a step back.

“Aren’t *you* a feisty one?” The one that spoke wasn’t the man whose hand I’d slapped, but rather, the short, older one. His discolored eyes took on a fearsome look. “I do like tenacious women, but you might wanna have a little think about the situation you’re in if you don’t wanna get hurt.”

Shit. Looks like I’ve rattled their cages.

The men’s gazes gathered upon me, and a bead of sweat dripped uncomfortably down my spine. My best bet was probably to act submissive and docile to trick them into lowering their guard. But unfortunately, it was too late

for that now.

“I should say the same to you,” I declared. “Do you know what situation *you’re* in?”

“What?” one of the men said, frowning with suspicion.

I turned to him and grinned. Though I was panicking on the inside, I managed to appear calm and collected. While clenching my hand into a fist to disguise its trembling, I frantically searched in my sputtering brain for something to say.

A bluff would do. I just had to prolong the conversation and give Sir Leonhart enough time to race back here. I began to grow desperate, unable to think of the right words, but then I trudged through the memories of my past life.

“Scum like you who can only prey on weak little girls... You plan to sell *me*? I’d laugh if the idea weren’t so preposterous. You ought to remember who you are when you’re talking to me.”

My plan to see myself through to safety was this: copy the mannerisms of the proud noble girls that I’d seen in books and manga. But, it looked like I’d accidentally confused “proud” with “arrogant.”

This is wrong, Rose. You’re playing the role of a villainess when you should be acting like a proud noble girl. This isn’t what I wanted at all!

Naturally, the men were furious.

“Scum?! You’ve said it now!”

“You little bitch...”

Their attention was now fully focused on me, and the thin man unwittingly released Hannah.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her rush over to the unconscious boys, and I breathed a small sigh of relief.

Maybe it won’t work right this minute, but all I need to do is give her a chance and she might be able to take them to safety.

“And here I was,” the older man said, “willing to take the ransom money and let you go unharmed...if only you’d just behaved yourself.”

“*Ransom?* You’ll have to work on your jokes. From whom are you proposing you should extract that ransom?” Although I was absolutely terrified by their fearsome glares, my mouth did the talking for me. My every word dripped with another provocation.

The sight of the older man squinting his eyes as he watched me was chilling. I put on a domineering smirk even though I was petrified on the inside.

“Your parents, obviously,” said the thug. “We’ll have you crying, ‘Mommy, daddy, come save me while my head’s still on my shoulders!’”

I quivered after hearing his naked threat. My fear was so overwhelming that I wanted nothing more than to flee, but my feet wouldn’t move. It was as if they were nailed down.

The man looked delighted when he heard me gasp.

My heart almost wavered when he focused that sadistic gaze on me, but somewhere in my soul, a flame reignited.

“My father won’t yield to a threat like that,” I said.

“Wha...” The man lost his tongue. My words must’ve taken him by surprise.

Out of all of my bluffs and lies, this was the one truth: I knew that my father would shrug off my captivity. In the back of my mind, I could picture him laughing scornfully and saying, *You should be able to handle a predicament, especially one this minor, by yourself.*

“He’d say that state funds shouldn’t be wasted on a girl who can’t take care of vermin by herself.”

“Y-You little brat...!!!”

My plan hadn’t been to provoke them; I’d merely spoken my mind. Even so, the men were enraged. The older one gave in to his anger and snatched my hand. His boorish fingers gouged into my wrist and my bones creaked.

“Ow!” The instant that I let out a quiet scream from the pain, I heard a loud bang.

The sound wasn’t from me being struck.

“Oof.”

Although my vision was distorted by welling tears, I saw one of the kidnappers standing by the doorway... His knees buckled, and his body collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut. A figure sprung out from behind the fallen thug and advanced toward the thin man at a speed too quick to follow with my eyes. The figure delivered a hard chop to my captor's neck with the side of his hand, and after a brief groan, the thug bent double and tumbled to the floor.

“Who the hell are you?!” the tall-statured man screamed. Pale from fear and desperation, he swung his arm.

But the newcomer simply retreated a step back and avoided this crude attack with ease. The large kidnapper had lost his balance, and my savior wheeled his hand behind the thug's thick neck. Drawing the thug's head toward himself, he delivered a strong, merciless kick into the man's jaw.

The large man's body lurched backward, and his eyes rolled back into his head. A moment later his body fell, crushing a fragile chair that happened to be in the way and sending splinters of wood and dust flying all around.

It was all over in an instant, and the commotion had taken my breath away. In just a few seconds, four criminals were reduced to one.

The figure who'd saved me was standing calmly in the center of the room, brushing the dust from his knight's uniform with his hand.

He turned his gaze in my direction and caught both the last kidnapper and me in the web of his jet-black eyes. The criminal and I both trembled—I with delight and the man with terror.

“Sir Leon...” There was a tremor in my voice from my overwhelming emotions. My eyes grew watery of their own accord. Even through my murky vision, I could see Sir Leonhart's face writhing as though in pain.

“Stop!!!” the man screeched, frightened by Sir Leonhart as he took a step toward us. The criminal pulled me close to himself while screaming.

I let out a small whine of pain when he grabbed the same wrist that he'd already injured.

“I’ve got a hostage...” The man sounded like a generic villain while he held the knife to my throat.

However, Sir Leonhart beat him to the punch by a split second.

“Oof!”

Sir Leonhart threw a wood chip with pinpoint accuracy, which struck the back of the man’s hand, causing him to release his grip on the knife. The blade dropped to the floor, spinning around in circles as it clattered toward Sir Leonhart’s foot. He kicked the handle with his boot, and when the knife shot upward, Sir Leonhart elegantly snatched it out of midair.

For a moment, he dropped his gaze to the rusty knife, but then, he returned his focus to the kidnapper. His jet-black eyes were overtaken by a glare colder than any I’d ever seen before. His narrowed glower seemed so piercing and so overflowing with murderous rage that I half imagined he could’ve poked a hole straight through the criminal with it. The rest of Sir Leonhart’s face betrayed no emotion, looking as beautiful as an elaborate doll, which made his glare all the more terrifying.

“Hurry up and get your dirty hands off of her,” Sir Leonhart ordered brusquely.

The man flinched, but only momentarily. He shook his head as though to dispel his fear, then shouted his counterargument. “Y-Yeah right! If you value this girl’s life—”

His hands reached for my neck.

However, Sir Leonhart interrupted his threat. “Hands off, I said.” His tone sent shivers down my spine.

“Wh-What are you say—”

Maintaining a vicious glare at the stammering criminal, Sir Leonhart flipped the knife’s handle over so that the blade was pointing downward, then plunged it into the knocked-over table. There was a loud thud. Although the knife was old and dull, it had sunk deeply into the table, up to the handle.

The kidnapper froze, his eyes and mouth open wide, as though he’d

witnessed a premonition of his own demise.

“Go ahead and lay a single finger on her. I’ll carve every kind of agony and terror into your very soul, using whatever means I can,” Sir Leonhart declared. His expression was serious, and he made it clear that he was neither lying nor bluffing.

The criminal’s will to resist evaporated. He groaned, his hand went limp, and it dropped away.

Thanks to Sir Leonhart’s actions, the incident came to a speedy conclusion. The criminals were apprehended and transported to the palace, and the children were all unharmed—including Kai, the one who’d initially gone missing. By the time that we’d wrapped up the necessities and had begun our return to the capital, the sky was already pitch-black.

“Does it hurt?”

Sir Leonhart and I were in the carriage on our way home, and he was peering at my hand with concern. My wrist was red and swollen where the thug had grabbed me. I had a damp cloth pressed against my injury to reduce the swelling, but I expected that it would be bruised tomorrow. The mark would likely remain for a few days at least.

“Just a little,” I replied. “But I’m okay. It’s not that bad.” I gave a little flick of the wrist to prove this, but Sir Leonhart still looked downcast.

He scooped my wrists up, cloth and all, and wrapped his own hands around them as if nursing me. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am...for not arriving sooner.”

Though I felt flustered by the firm sensation of his hands on mine, I shook my head in denial. “Don’t say that,” I told him. “If you hadn’t saved me, I would have *much* worse than a bruise right now. This is my comeuppance for provoking them more than necessary.” I grinned, but Sir Leonhart’s brow furrowed deeply.

He grimaced and looked me directly in the eye. “So you *are* aware of what you did, then?”

From his displeased tone, I inferred that I was about to be told off. *Oops, I feel like I've, once again, gone and poked the hornet's nest without realizing it.*

"Ummm... Yes." My eyebrows drooped and I looked pathetically dejected as I nodded.

Sir Leonhart let out a long sigh. "Why are you always like that? You can correctly assess the situation and take action, but you prioritize everyone else's safety over your own."

"Huh?"

Sir Leonhart continued, ignoring my confused interjection. "The children you helped to escape won't have to suffer guilt because you were considerate about their feelings. You sent them away under a pretense—they were going to bring back someone who could resolve the fight. And the reason the captured children were freed safely was because you drew the criminals' attention onto yourself with your provocations. That made my intervention easier as well. Nothing that you did was technically wrong."

Although he was affirming my actions, his tone sounded horribly frustrated, and he was in a rush to spit his words out.

"My plan wasn't as competent as you're making it..." ...*sound*, I almost finished, but then I shut my mouth. Sir Leonhart's eyes shone with a frightful look.

But, at the time, I really wasn't thinking anything commendable.

When I'd sent the children away, I'd been unable to come up with a better excuse than "go get help."

And when I'd provoked the criminals, the words had just slipped off of my tongue, and I hadn't managed to channel a more appropriate character than a villainess.

All of that was on-the-spot, unplanned improvisation; nothing that I'd done had been worthy of praise.

Sir Leonhart averted his eyes from me and stared at his hands, which were still holding onto mine. "You did your utmost to protect Nevel's subjects...but I

can't find it in myself to praise you for that." His murmured voice sounded agonized, as though he were dredging up the pain from deep within.

"In the future, I don't want you to carry out the best plan, if that plan is guaranteed to save everyone but yourself. Pick the second-best plan, one which has a chance of saving everyone...*including yourself*."

"Sir Leon?"

"You don't have to be smart. You don't have to be upstanding," he mumbled, ever-so-slightly increasing the strength of his grip. He lowered his head and brought his temple toward my hand. The pose was reminiscent of a pious Christian confessing their sins.

"Please, have more concern for your well-being. For the sake of those like me who care about you."

"Huh—" I hadn't expected him to say that, and I froze. My voice sounded silly as it escaped my throat. "C-C-Care? You mean..." I was too shocked to form words properly. Sir Leonhart didn't laugh at me for stuttering that word back at him.

He was watching me with a meek expression, like the face a child would pull just before a reprimand. "Is there something wrong with me caring for you?"

I shook my head and withheld the urge to start crying. "No... No, there's not."

When he saw my reaction, Sir Leonhart's eyes narrowed kindly. "But, I can't yet think of you as a woman. I'd hoped not to say anything that could be misconstrued and cause you undue distress, but—"

I knew very well that the adult Sir Leonhart couldn't view a child like me as a romantic prospect. That's what I'd always told myself, but still, I was worried. To him, I was nothing more than a young princess. Even when I grew up, would that perspective ever change? I became frightened every time I wondered about it. Did Sir Leonhart view me as someone with value outside of our relationship as a princess and the royal guard captain?

"—you're my slightly stubborn but hardworking princess," Sir Leonhart said as if to eradicate my uncertainty. "So please, take more care of the person that I care about...because she's irreplaceable to me."

I'd thought so already, but now, I'm sure: I don't wanna give up on him.

A slight blush rose to Sir Leonhart's cheeks as he put on a bashful smile, and my feelings were reconfirmed.



The Reincarnated Princess Negotiates

The man before me was slouched on an exquisite chaise. As his fingers stopped turning the pages of documents in his hands, he whispered, “This is a surprise.”

Despite his words, his statuesque and handsome face seemed to be not the least bit shocked, and he simply sported his usual deadpan expression. He looked me up and down, then returned his gaze once more to the documents in his hands.

“I had assumed that you’d avoid me for the time being,” he asserted. “Incorrectly, it seems.” His eyes scanned the letters on the page, and the motion was accompanied by the sound of crumpling paper.

It felt like he was trying to hint that he was busy working, but I ignored that. I had to. As someone who’d lived her previous life in a country where transgressing boundaries was frowned upon, I would’ve preferred to say, “I’ll come back later,” turn around, and leave. But if I were to make an exit now, I’d have nothing fruitful to spend my time on.

And I only had so much time left. *He’ll just need to spare me a few minutes*, I reassured myself. I stood up straight.

“I’m here because I have a request for you, father,” I announced. At that moment, his fingers stopped rifling through the documents.

“A request?” He repeated that word back to me in a chilly tone of voice.

My father had changed the atmosphere in the room without the slightest alteration to his expression. I felt like my spine was about to freeze. To be honest, he was scaring me.

“You have a request for *me*?”

A child without a single accomplishment to her name dares to pester me for something? I could almost hear that frightening voice overlaying his words.

This isn't me being overly self-conscious; I'm sure that's a pretty accurate transcript of what's in his mind.

I wanna bolt. I wanna get away, but I have to hold my ground. Fleeing now won't solve anything, and I definitely don't wanna come back and start this conversation again from square one.

I fought off the grimace that almost appeared on my face and put on a smile instead. "Yes," I confirmed audaciously.

My father locked me in his gaze. Although I almost shivered at the stare from his pale-blue eyes, I didn't look away. After we'd exchanged silent glares for about thirty seconds, my father lowered his eyes and sighed.

He carelessly flung the documents away, and they slid across the marble table. He gestured with a finger toward the chair opposite himself, and it took a few seconds for me to realize that he was telling me to sit down.

The champagne-gold chaise with cabriole legs was a delight to sit on. It was a touch firmer than the chaise in my room, but that suited me perfectly and I savored the comfort as I brought up the main topic.

"A few days ago, you told me that you'd give me a bird."

"I did."

"In exchange for returning that bird, I'd like for you to make the necessary arrangements to allow me some freedom of movement."

Upon hearing my request, my father raised one eyebrow. "It's bold of you...using a gift that you haven't yet received as leverage."

I couldn't summon a reply. It was true that the bird wasn't yet in my possession, but I had no other options; there were no other bargaining chips at my disposal that I could use to broker a deal.

"Are you sure you won't regret letting go of the bird before you've seen it?" he asked.

I nodded in response to my father's question, looking meek.

Honestly though, receiving a bird would do me no good. If it was an actual bird for me to keep as a pet, then, well, I had Nero in my room to worry about.

Even if “bird” was just a metaphor and the gift was something else entirely, I knew that I was too inexperienced to use it properly. I couldn’t imagine someone like me being able to control a bird, especially one that had flown around the world acting as my father’s eyes.

Whether it was a bird with gorgeous plumage or a clandestine agent with a superior skill set, I wouldn’t be able to utilize the gift to its full potential. It would be happier staying with my father than finding itself stuck with someone like me who didn’t understand its value.

“I think that a bird amazing enough for you to call ‘useful’ would be too much for me to handle at my current level.” I offered an honest expression of my true feelings, and my father’s eyes widened a little.

He placed his elbow on the sofa’s armrest, cupped his chin with his hand, and crossed his long legs. Even his slovenly actions looked fabulous, but I was too mentally preoccupied to be beguiled by the sight. He stared at me appraisingly, and I sat up straight.

“Right.” That single word was my father’s only answer.

That all? I quibbled in my mind, dumbstruck. I felt all the more let down because I’d prepared myself for a scornful glare and an interrogation about whether I’d lost my nerve.

“Aren’t you disappointed in me?” I asked.

“Disappointment is only possible where there has been hope.”

“Is that so?!” I clenched my fists and swallowed my anger.

“I’m joking,” my father said matter-of-factly, keeping a straight face.

I felt like I wanted to kill him.

I also wanted to mirror his expression and respond, “Jokes are supposed to be funny.” It took every ounce of my effort to resist that urge.

“Those in positions of responsibility must sometimes be willing to wield powers that are beyond their capabilities,” he explained. “But bravery is not the same as recklessness. There is no reason to scorn those who know their limits and pursue more roundabout routes to their goals.”

He's dressing his words up and making it hard to understand, but I guess "Do what you want," is what he's getting at.

He'd decided the time limit for me but had let me choose the methods and processes that I wanted to use to achieve my objectives. I couldn't decipher my father's plan; he could've been trying to make this a learning experience, or he could've just been testing me. Either way, I decided to take him at his word.

"So," he began, "let's say that you've given the bird back to me and have attained freedom of movement. What possible benefit could there be for you?"

My father's words were as pointed as ever. I felt like I'd been stabbed in the heart, but at the same time, I was a little scared of how acclimated I'd become to this treatment.

We both knew that I wasn't of much use. Rather than taking action myself, it'd be wiser if another person did it for me. Maybe someone like that "bird" I'd just relinquished a moment ago. But would it really be reasonable to rely entirely on someone else while doing absolutely nothing by myself? Accepting help was in no way equivalent to wholesale delegation.

"Unlike you, I can't make decisions based solely on reports," I said.

I was inexperienced, so I couldn't properly internalize any information, except for what I'd seen or heard directly. Because of that, my response would be inevitably delayed. After all, I'd had foreknowledge about the sorcerer abduction plot, and that had still turned out far from perfect.

I wasn't deft enough to make things happen by giving orders to others while I locked myself up in the palace.

"I can't decide anything without venturing out on my own two feet..." I explained. "I think that what I've been missing is resolution."

Even before my father had set this task for me, the course I was to follow had been clear: there was a future that I wanted to avoid, and I had no intention of slacking. I'd do my utmost to prevent it.

And yet, I'd felt intimidated by the scale of the objective that I had to accomplish. This late in the game, the craggy terrain of the path I walked had started to snag at my feet. I hadn't tried to foist my burden onto somebody

else, I hoped. But at some point, I *had* probably presumed on the help of others.

A part of me had assumed that somebody would fix things even if I made a mistake, as had happened during the abduction of Lutz and Teo. I'd held onto some tiny, irresponsible expectation that others would sort out my problems.

Make myself indispensable... The king probably hadn't given me this task as a kind, fatherly gesture. He'd most likely write me off if I failed, and I wasn't so conceited as to interpret that as strictness born of love.

Even so, I was grateful to him for one reason. *Thank you for plainly revealing my own unfair nature, which even I hadn't noticed about myself.*

Had I not been confronted with this threat, I might've only half-heartedly pursued my goals. If my inaction were to result in failure and the loss of countless lives, I wouldn't deserve to say, "I've done all that I could."

Would I tremble at the prospect of the world ending? Would I next go running, tail between my legs, to the shrine maiden?

Over my dead body!

"You'll be culpable for whatever happens as a result of your actions," my father stated. "Knowing that, will you persist?"

"Yes." I nodded, tightening my expression.

I couldn't quite manage to stop my hands and voice from trembling, but I think I should be forgiven for that. After all, I had no idea what would happen to me now. I could fall ill with plague. I could even die. There was no way that a princess—especially one who'd lived her whole life safely behind the protection of the palace walls—would be ready to face that challenge.

But if I'm the one culpable...does that mean that nobody else will have to shoulder the responsibility for my actions anymore? If so, then I'll take that challenge.

My father heaved a single sigh. "You're always unpredictable, aren't you?"

When I saw a touch of unconcealed exasperation in his expression, a wry smile formed spontaneously on my lips. "I've decided to work hard to find

happiness.”

“Right,” he said briefly, and his gentle tone surprised me.

(Continued in the next volume)

Side Story: The Melancholy of the First Prince

As soon as I entered my office, I caught sight of the piles stacked up on my desk. My feet ground to a halt. I immediately wanted to turn around and return to my room, but that wouldn't do...

I had a tremendous amount of work to finish.

Reluctantly, I approached my work desk. Something new was perched atop of the usual piles; I plucked the object and ran my eyes across it.

Apparently, my expectation had been correct. "He's done it again." I was sick of this, and my feelings had crept into my voice.

"What's the matter?"

I looked over my shoulder at the man who'd called out to me, then shoved the object into his hands.

It was a portrait.

My guard—Leonhart, the royal guard captain—took the painting from me, seeming a little confused. He saw the pretty girl smiling inside of the extravagantly decorated picture frame, and appeared to surmise what this represented.

"I see," he muttered.

"I wish he'd stop having portraits of suitors delivered to my office," I snarled, before heaving a sigh. I wasn't even attempting to hide my displeasure anymore.

Working at my desk was suddenly unappealing to me. I snatched a bundle of documents from the desk's surface and sat on the sofa that I usually reserved for visitors. As I was messily flicking through the documents, I could hear Leonhart's stifled laughter from behind me.

"It's not funny. This is a serious problem that's sapping my motivation," I said, turning around to protest his amusement.

“Forgive me,” Leonhart apologized, but I couldn’t sense any remorse in either his tone or his expression. His relaxed attitude made any further protestation seem pointless, so I returned my gaze to the documents. “Should I request that they be sent to your personal chambers from now on?”

“No, don’t bother. You wouldn’t get anywhere.” I waved my hand to reject his proposal without raising my head from the heap of documents. “They’re being sent to my office on my father’s orders, I expect. Any complaint from me would only serve to torment the poor messenger.”

My father had probably anticipated that I’d use my hectic work schedule as an excuse to store the portraits away without looking at them. That was why he’d been sending them to my office. The choice to pile them on my desk instead of placing them on an easel was most likely by my father’s instruction as well. That placement sent a very clear message—selecting a suitor to marry was also a part of my work.

All of it got on my nerves.

I understood that taking a wife and having children was one of the duties to be fulfilled by the heir to the throne. And I was willing to marry if need be. But my honest thoughts were that I’d prefer, if at all possible, to postpone the discussion for just a little while longer.

“I don’t think I’m ready to become a husband yet,” I whispered quietly.

Leonhart looked shocked. My whining must have reached his ears.

“Is it unusual for me to say something like that?” I asked. I dropped the documents onto the table and leaned into the backrest. Looking up into Leonhart’s eyes, I saw that he was wearing a slightly troubled smile.

“To be honest, it *is* rather unusual.”

“Don’t be *too* honest.” I relaxed my posture and sank into the sofa. A smirk was beginning to bloom on my face as well. “I have no particular desire to get married—my sympathies go instead to the poor woman who’d have to be my bride.”

Leonhart asked “*Why?*” with his eyes rather than his words. I thought for a moment while his gaze prompted me to continue.

The reason that sprang to mind first and foremost was this: I lacked the confidence that I could love my bride. Love wasn't a necessary prerequisite for royal marriages, which my parents could well attest to. However, my prospective wife would likely be a member of another country's royal family. That meant that she'd have been pressed into leaving her homeland to live in an unfamiliar country, and I didn't want to devolve into the sort of scum who could be inhospitable to a woman in that situation.

I'd want to treat her well. I'd want to be loyal to her. But emotions can't be controlled at will.

"I don't think that I could ever love somebody more than I do my brother and sister."

"Your Highness, really..." After hearing my frank statement, Leonhart trailed off into silence, looking slightly disturbed.

I knew that my words sounded silly, but I had no intention of rephrasing them. They were my true, unadulterated feelings. If I were free to abandon my responsibilities as a prince, I'd eschew marriage altogether and spend my days watching Rose and Johan grow up. If I could closely observe both of them—finding a partner, marrying, being blessed with children, and becoming happy—that'd be more than enough happiness for me too.

"After all," I said, "Rose's children would be cuter than any child that takes after me."

I broke into a smile when I pictured my adorable little sister. Rose and I were both occupied with work; the number of days since I'd last gotten to see her face was increasing, with no end in sight.

Is she doing all right? She's smart, but can also be too stubborn and overly serious. She doesn't change her mind once it's made up, and she has a habit of forcing herself past her limits, so it's difficult not to worry about her.

Recently, she'd been taking Leonhart to guard her more frequently. I had wondered what they were up to, but I didn't pry too deeply. She seemed adamant about keeping those details to herself.

"Leonhart, is Rose all right?"

He paused for a moment.

His brows deeply furrowed, and he made a face like he'd mistakenly swallowed something disgusting. Leonhart could look relaxed in the most daunting of situations, so it was rare for him to show negative emotions this clearly.

Hmm, so something has happened, I thought.

The palace would be in an uproar if an injury had befallen our princess, so she mustn't have suffered any physical harm. However, emotional harm was another matter. She must've pushed herself too hard again, as always, and proactively inflicted trauma upon her own heart. It was just like during the sorcerer abduction plot; she was foolish enough to plunge herself onward without turning back, even knowing that the path she traveled was laden with thorns.

"Jeez," I groaned. I crossed my arms above my lap and lowered my eyes. "She can be frustrating," I muttered bitterly.

Both Johan and I wished, from the bottoms of our hearts, for Rose to be content; we were prepared to do anything it took to ensure her happiness. And yet, Rose herself would plunge ever further forward on her own feet as though she didn't need our help. However much I begged her to rely on me more, she'd smile and deflect and insist that she already relied on me plenty.

Her newfound tendency to ask Leonhart for help could be called an improvement, but I wanted to be the one she relied on first. However, I resolved to put my pride as a brother to one side for the time being. What was most important was for Rose to be healthy and happy.

"Rose always pushes herself too hard, so I don't want you to let her out of your sight."

Leonhart nodded meekly in reply. "Understood."

"I want you to do my share of protecting her and, if necessary, setting her straight."

"Understood."

“Also...”

I almost appended one last request, but I stopped myself.

“Your Highness?” Leonhart said, prompting me to continue my sentence.

I just shrugged. “It’s nothing.”

Leonhart looked unconvinced, but I turned away from him and picked up the papers that I’d thrown onto the table. I began to thumb through the documents, signaling that the conversation was over, and he didn’t press me any further.

It’s too early to say, “Don’t make her cry.”

Rose was in love with Leonhart. That meant there were probably plenty of tears in store for her going forward. I was sure that she would shed many tears about a romance that failed to progress in the direction that she wanted it to. But that wasn’t Leonhart’s fault. Nor was it appropriate for me to intervene in that matter. Those words would only be effective once both Rose and Leonhart understood the other’s feelings.

I won’t forgive you if you make my sister cry.

I wanted to say that... But not yet.

My heart flooded with a complicated mess of emotions, and I heaved a sigh. Although making my little sister cry was something I’d rather not do, I wanted to delay saying those words for as long as possible.

Maybe that makes me a bad older brother...

Character Design



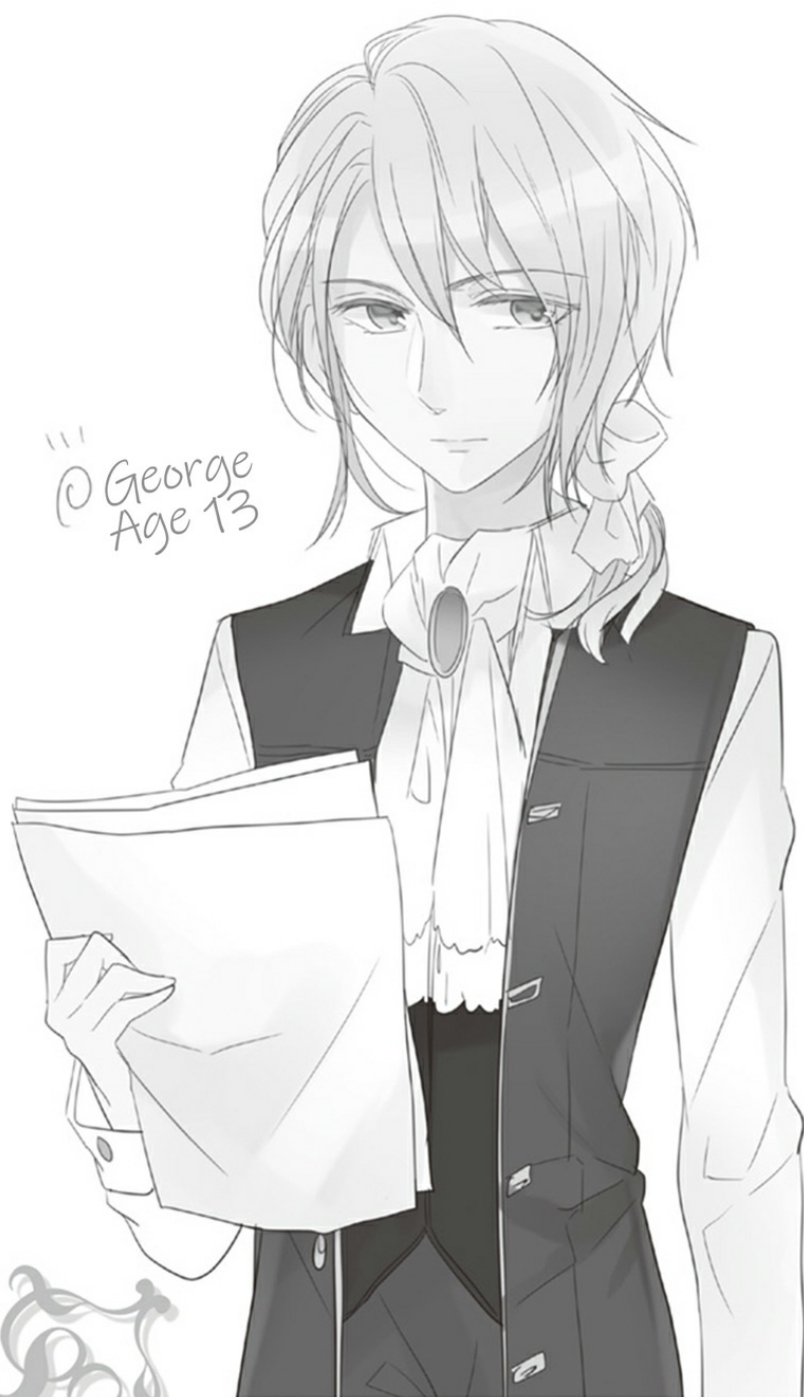
Michael
von Diebolt





George zu Eigel

George
Age 13



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heads
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Randolf
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⓪ Randolf
About
175cm

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von Altman



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The Reincarnated Princess Spends Another Day Skipping Story Routes:
Volume 2

by Bisu

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